

A Dynamic Pair On The Air!

Verna Felton and Bea Benadaret

BY BILL OATES

The golden days of radio were filled with voices that left an indelible image in the theater of the mind. Many programs became better known for the stars who owned the sounds that created the pictures than the sponsors' names with whom the audience was supposed to identify. For example, some were scheduled by the networks as *The Johnson's Wax Program*, *The Fleischmann Hour*, or *Camel Caravan*, but these programs were better known as (and changed to) *Fibber McGee and Molly*, *Rudy Vallee*, and *Abbott and Costello*. As talented as these and other great radio stars were, all of them praised their supporting cast members as valuable to the success of their respective shows. Two of the greatest supporting female voices on radio (as well as in other entertainment) were Verna Felton and Bea Benadaret.

Following these two marvelous talents in tandem is an easy task, for not only did they work in the same media simultaneously, but they also found themselves supporting each other and literally passing in the hallways of the great radio networks and studios for over two decades. To add to the parallels in their great careers, both women grew up within 100 miles of each other in the state that provided them with the bulk of their employment in the entertainment industry through the 1960's.

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Born in Salinas, California, just south of San Jose in the northern Bay area in 1890, **Verna Felton** found her way to the radio industry after numerous local stage appearances. By the time NBC decided that its new state-of-the-art radio studio was to be opened in Los Angeles, Verna had honed her acting skills and was active in the first medium that would bring her distinctive voice to American listeners.

The first important radio program to provide a regular role for Verna Felton was a primarily West Coast NBC program entitled *Point Sublime*, which played on Mondays from 1940-42. Somewhere on a Pacific Coast highway was a fictitious small town whose idyllic setting held a store and motel operated by Ben Willet. Played by Cliff Arquette, the future "Charlie Weaver" who was also getting his early start in big time entertainment, Willet tended the business where a variety of locals came in to talk around the cracker barrel. Among the real actors playing these characters with the very gossipy Hattie Hirsch (Verna's role) were Jane Morgan, Mel Blanc, and Earle Ross. The program moved to Mutual before ending its first run in 1944. Resurrected on ABC in 1947, the original cast reassembled for the coast-to-coast debut in early 1948, but the new version lasted only one season.

Shortly after the aforementioned show began, changes in *The Rudy Vallee Show* were developing when the starring singer assumed more of his duties in the Coast Guard during World War II, and Joan Davis

was brought in gradually to host the newly named *The Sealtest Village Store*, running not only "the store," but also the program after Vallee left. The transition to a female starring in a network radio program was approached cautiously, so Jack Haley was brought on board to share the duties. One important addition to this evolving format was the character of Blossom Blimp, a.k.a. Verna Felton. After establishing that a female could star on a radio show, Joan was finally given her own vehicle in 1945,

Joanie's Tea Room on CBS, and the familiar voice of her friend Verna Felton came along as well.

Also during the war years, another supporting role presented itself when Verna Felton played the talkative housekeeper, Mrs. McIntyre, on *Tommy Riggs and Betty Lou* during 1942-43. Tommy Riggs was an uncanny performer who could immediately change his

male voice to that of a little girl. Throughout the 1930's and into the early 1940's, he exercised this role on a variety of shows. It is interesting to note is that, like Joan Davis and many other radio stars, Riggs likewise got his big break on the *Rudy Vallee Show*.

Many opportunities on radio, like Miz Pierce, friend to the title character on *The Judy Canova Show*; Dennis Day's protective mother on *The Jack Benny Show*; a supporting player on *The Ray Bolger Show* during the summer of 1945; guest appear-

ances on *Guest Star, Mail Call, The Jimmy Durante Show, The Adventures of Ozzie and Harriet, Lux Radio Theater, Screen Guild Players* (an especially important part was as one of the sweet old aunts who murdered lonesome gentlemen in "Arsenic and Old Lace"); and Mother Barton on the *Cinnamon Bear* presented themselves for Verna Felton throughout the 1940's. However, she will be perhaps best remembered as Namma, the feisty grandmother who had to control Red Skeleton's Mean Widdle Kid



VERNA FELTON

PHOTOFEST

■ *The Red Skelton Show.*

Ozzie and Harriet Nelson had been important players with Skelton until they decided to start their own show in 1944, and coupled with the departure of orchestra leader David Rose, new casting for the post-War version of the Skelton program was needed. Along with Lurene Tuttle and Pat McGeehan,

Verna Felton joined the cast of one of radio's best offerings. Her primary role was to discipline Red when he played the "I Dood It" little monster after one of his impish and usually destructive pranks. An obvious appealing character to play off his zany Junior, Verna Felton often broke up Skelton on mike (a fault detested by his critics, but beloved by his legions of followers) when she entered the script, and especially when she responded to Junior's suggestion that her past held some vile occupation, such as circus performer, boot-

VERNA and BEA

legger, gun moll or the like.

The last great part this wonderful character lady played on radio was that of Mrs. Odetts on *My Little Margie* in the early 1950's, and although she did not recreate her role on television, the new medium soon came calling. The first major part materialized when her radio character as Dennis Day's mother on *The Jack Benny Show* debuted in 1952 on television's *The RCA Victor Show*, a program that alternated every other week with Ezio Pinza. She also appeared with Ray Milland in *Meet Mr. McNulty*, which ran from 1952-53. However, her greatest on camera role came two years later when she assumed the part of Hilda Crocker on *December Bride*.

Spring Byington played the main character, Lily Ruskin, on the very popular program about a spry widow who was available for matrimony. She lived with her daughter and son-in-law in the most amicable of households. Her chief confidant and sidekick was Hilda, who often joined in unusual adventures, like the time the two ladies decided to give son-in-law Matt and daughter Ruth some time alone by going grunion hunting.

In her 60's, Verna Felton was quite adept at doing her own stunts on the show, such as the times when she had to rough house with wrestlers, skip rope with a boxer who would later become her sparring partner, and roll out of a window head first. Another character who often contributed to the seniors' escapades was neighbor Pete Porter (Harry Morgan), whose key reason for cavorting with these ladies was to get away from his never seen, nagging wife Gladys.

So successful was Morgan's role that an early TV spin off, *Pete and Gladys*, was born as a kind of continuation after *December Bride* finished its run in 1961. Hilda defended the much maligned Mrs. Porter, and perhaps Gladys' likable on camera demeanor in the new series disappointed the viewers who expected a monster, for the show was cancelled after two seasons. At least one final appearance on television was Verna Felton's when she guested on the television special *Henry Fonda and the Family* in 1962.

To add to Verna Felton's entertainment credentials, she appeared in numerous feature films, such as Langdon Towne's



PHOTOFEST

CAST OF TV'S DECEMBER BRIDE -- (clockwise from top left) Dean Miller as Matt Henshaw, Harry Morgan as Pete Porter, Verna Felton as Hilda Crocker, Spring Byington as Lily Ruskin, Frances Rafferty as Ruth Henshaw.

mother in *Northwest Passage*, *If I Had My Way*, *She Wrote the Book*, *The Fuller Brush Man*, *Belles on Their Toes*, *Don't Bother To Knock*, *The Gunfighter*, *Buccaneers' Girl*, *Little Egypt*, *New Mexico*, Mrs. Helen Potts in the highly acclaimed *Picnic*, *The Oklahoman*, *Taming Sutton's Gal*, *Guns of the Timberland*, and *The Man from Button Willow*. Her character parts were presented in movies from all of the major studios and are a credit to her durability, for the preceding list began in 1940 and finished in 1965.

Another a long time resident of California, **Bea Benadaret** was born in New York City in 1906 and moved to San Francisco at age four. Though she came to the West Coast at an early age, she must have retained the sounds of urban New York years later, for the characters she often voiced reflected the accents of the city's boroughs. By the time she was ready to act professionally, she discovered her home was central to many great radio shows and early stars.

After progressing through the St. Rose Academy and the Reginald School of Acting, Bea was ready to move into the very active Western hub of the National Broadcasting Company in San Francisco. Working in local productions, she caught the ear of numerous directors at Bay area stations. However, when Western network broadcasting moved to the Los Angeles area in the middle of the 1930's, she also headed south where her greatest fortunes were to be found.

By 1936, Bea Benadaret found herself in Hollywood, which was growing as quickly as its new radio studios could accommodate the shows transferring to the West coast. Like Verna Felton, Bea soon found her place on numerous radio programs, starting with the same early show on which Verna played, portraying Mrs.



BEA BENADARET

Riggs' nosy neighbor Mrs. Wingate on *Tommy Riggs and Betty Lou*. The two actresses' paths crossed many times during radio's golden 1940's; and in an ironic twist, even though Verna did not accompany Dennis Day to his own program after playing the very demanding and defensive mother to the tenor on Jack Benny's show, Bea came aboard to assume the on air role of Dennis' girlfriend's mother, Mrs. Anderson.

During the 1940's Bea Benadaret was extremely active in radio, and among the parts that she played were Judy's mother on *A Date with Judy*, one of radio's finest dozen on-the 1945 summer show *Twelve Players*, the very nasal Gloria the maid and Mrs. Waddington on *The Adventures of Ozzie and Harriet*, with Jack Benny in the *Campbell's Playhouse* episode "June Moon," Mrs. Carstairs on *Fibber McGee and Molly*, Wanda Werewolf on *Glamour Manor*, Aunt Clara Longnecker on the *Mel Blanc Show*, and Eve Goodwin on *The Great Gildersleeve*. Her best remembered

supporting part in radio was when she was paired with Sara Berner as Jack Benny's eavesdropping and potential date telephone operators on *The Jack Benny Show*.

"Old Blue Eyes' light is flashing" might begin the segment, and by the time the two critical switchboard operators were finished, every cheap joke at the expense of Benny and references to their own pathetic lives filled the segment. The mind pictures were outrageously funny, as the listener imagined the two gossiping operators hooked up to their headsets at the network, while the boss was trying to get a reasonable message sent. More bothered by his intrusion than actually doing their jobs, Mabel Flapsaddle or cohort Gertrude Gearshift (Bea as the very rough diamond) discussed dating the world's cheapest man. It was during this, the heyday of the program in the late 1940's, that Felton, Benadaret, and their male cohort in both radio and cartoons, Mel Blanc, were part of the supporting cast that kept the program on top of the ratings.

Unlike Verna Felton, Bea Benadaret flirted with stardom in her own radio series. As was often the case of many favorite radio shows of the 1940's, summer series were broadcast to see if they might make it as a regular program. Bea Benadaret and Gale Gordon were playing Iris and Rudolph Atterbury, sidekicks to Liz and George Cooper, on the Lucille Ball show, *My Favorite Husband*, from 1948 through 1951, and after the second season ended, the couple were renamed Martha and John Granby for its summer replacement.

The successes of the play/movie *George Washington Slept Here* and the book/movie *The Egg and I* inspired CBS to develop Granby's *Green Acres*, a radio story about a city couple who attempt to make a life

on the farm, and instead become the butt of the rustic life. Gale Gordon played a banker (one he would reprise on television's *The Lucy Show* years later) to his addlebrained wife. If this all sounds familiar, Granby's was dropped from the title when it became *Green Acres* twenty years later on CBS-TV. In both media the displaced couple is assisted in their traumatic transition by farmhand Eb (Parley Baer on radio and Tom Lester on the tube). Another interesting connection to the TV version of the 1960's is that the setting was geographically connected to the fictitious Illinois crossroads of *Petticoat Junction*, the namesake for the only TV program which starred Bea Benadaret.

Just like Verna Felton, Bea Benadaret assumed numerous parts on radio from dramatic spots on the *Lux Radio Theatre* to comedy on *Maisie* or *The Penny Singleton Show*. And like Verna, there were many roles ahead on television, but before activities on the tube are examined, her film career also bears recalling. Bea Benadaret's cinema life was not as prestigious as Verna Felton's, for among her parts were minor movie roles in the likes of *The First Time*, *The Plunderers of Painted Flats*, *Tender is the Night*, as a file clerk in *Notorious* and a working girl in *On the Town*. Perhaps the best remembered motion picture roles of both ladies came when the Walt Disney Studio or Warner Brothers needed cartoon voices.

The part was small, the number of lines certainly did not match the size of the character, but Verna Felton debuted in a Disney Studio feature when she gave voice to a snooty elephant who was commenting on the bad parenting displayed by Dumbo's mother. Over the years her voice was heard in the following at this renowned studio: the crazed Queen of Hearts in *Alice in Wonderland*; *The Lady and the Tramp* where she dogged it with fellow radio stars



PHOTOFEST

TV's PETTICOAT JUNCTION-- Bea Benadaret as Kate Bradley with Frank Cady as Sam Drucker.

Bill Thompson, Alan Reed and Stan Freberg; the fairy godmother in *Cinderella*; as one of the three good fairies in *Sleeping Beauty*; and *The Jungle Book*, joining fellow Jack Benny radio star, Phil Harris.

Also during the 1940's through early 1960's, Bea Benadaret was active doing cartoon voices, primarily at Warner Brothers. When a gum chewing, brassy, Brooklynese teenager was needed to counter a character like Mel Blanc's Bugs Bunny, Bea assumed the role. When a number of female parts came up at the studio, where Blanc held a virtual monopoly over the male voices, only Bea Benadaret, June Foray and Jane Morgan came close in female voice time. One can only identify the female voices by ear, because for many years Mel Blanc had an agreement that his name alone was to be listed in the credits. Among the best parts Bea Benadaret played at Warners was Mama Bear to Stan Freberg's moronic Junior in *What's Brewin' Bruin?* (1948)

In Mel Blanc's autobiography, *That's Not All, Folks*, he expressed his long time relationship with this radio partner and frequent cartoon fellow: "I was probably closest to Bea [of the people who were part of his close circle of "voice" friends and whom he described as] ... warm, generous, and funny." After all of their years of radio, television, and cartoons, they were married in the guise of Barney and Betty Rubble on *The Flintstones*. Bea had to join other cast members (Jean "Wilma" Vander Pyl and Alan "Fred" Reed) of the first prime time cartoon in an unusual recording location, when they taped the early episodes around Mel's hospital bed in his home after he suffered a near fatal automobile accident in 1961.

Mel also recalled that Bea's first great visual performance was as Blanche Morton on the *Burns and Allen Show* (and its follow-up *The George Burns Show* from 1958-59). Gracie had a number of friends on the radio show, and Bea played in support on the program, but when a long time accomplice was needed for Gracie's half-baked schemes on video the assignment was given to Bea Benadaret. Her infectious laugh that usually came a beat and a half after Gracie proffered her seemingly serious plan of the night gave Blanche a steady part, and the only one to come close in longevity on the show was long suffering announcer Harry Von Zell, who came aboard when Bill Goodwin left after the first season. During the decade that the program ran, she outlasted four Harry Morton husbands: Hal March, John Brown, Fred Clark, and Larry Keating.

Regular parts on television continued for Bea Benadaret: the first major one was as the housekeeper Wilma on the short lived series *Peter Loves Mary*. Coincidentally, shortly after this show started, she was doing Betty Rubble's voice on *The Flintstones*, and for this situation comedy

that starred real life husband and wife Peter Lind Hayes and Mary Healy, the actress was joined by Alan "Fred Flintstone" Reed, who played Happy Richman on *Peter Loves Mary*. Other television appearances include *Screen Directors' Playhouse*, *the Bob Cummings Show*, *Restless Gun*, "The Happiest Day" (a *Chevy Show*), *Dobie Gillis* and *The New Breed*. After *Peter Loves Mary* ended, a role was available in a new program that would lead to Bea Benadaret's only starring part on TV.

Cast as the back hills cousin to Jed Clampett, Bea Benadaret's character Pearl Bodine figured in many of the first season's episodes of *The Beverly Hillbillies*. However, in the fall of 1963, as part of a wave of similar nonsensical comedies that proliferated on the CBS schedule in the early 1960's, her role was de-hillified when she became Kate Bradley, operator of the Shady Rest Hotel in Hooterville on *Petticoat Junction*.

Running the only business of its kind in the community was only part of the hotel manager's chores, for she also had to look after her lethargic Uncle Joe (Edgar Buchanan), keep the Cannonball steam train commissioned, and look out for her three exceptionally beautiful daughters (who, during the run of the show, were played by six different actresses.) So successful was this program that another series was spun off two years later. *Green Acres* has already been previously mentioned, and it is important to note that the two shows were so closely related that characters often played roles in both comedies.

Petticoat Junction climbed as high as number four in the Nielsen ratings, but its spin off soon eclipsed it, and as cast changes were made annually, the program remained viable in the ratings only as long as Bea Benadaret stayed at the helm. Dur-

ing the 1967-68 season she grew increasingly ill with lung cancer, and although she could have sat out the last five episodes of the season after she took radiation treatment, Bea Benadaret insisted on completing her part. Her replacement, June Lockhart, could keep the show on the schedule only one more year.

On October 13, 1968, Bea Benadaret died, and of this final, more dramatic comedy role, she said, "(Kate Bradley) has to walk the fine line between being humorous and tender. The other women I've played were strictly for laughs." Thank goodness that this fine actress was able to make the transition, giving the listener and viewer opportunities to appreciate her talent from the zany to the serious.

Mel Blanc recalled his fondness for Bea and her husband, when he wrote, "To lose them both (her long time husband Eugene Twombly was sound effects man for the *Jack Benny Show*; they died only four days apart) was very sad and painful."

After entertaining most of her 76 years, Verna Felton died on December 15, 1966. Her last duties involved being the honorary mayor of the San Fernando Valley, and of the many long-winded speeches she had to endure in her "official capacity," she quipped, "I wish they'd come to the point and get it over with!" (As this author writes these words, he can hear that gloriously unmistakable voice that emanated from Verna Felton in a variety of entertainment media for over forty years.)

Remembering the hours of fun that both of these wonderful character actresses created is as simple as finding one of the many old time radio shows, television programs, or motion pictures that utilized the talents of Verna Felton and Bea Benadaret. The two never failed to compete with the best of the better known entertainers; and it is their contributions that made many of the shows successful from start to finish. ■