

Ralph Edwards' Truth or Consequences AREN'T WE DEVILS?



BY JIM COX

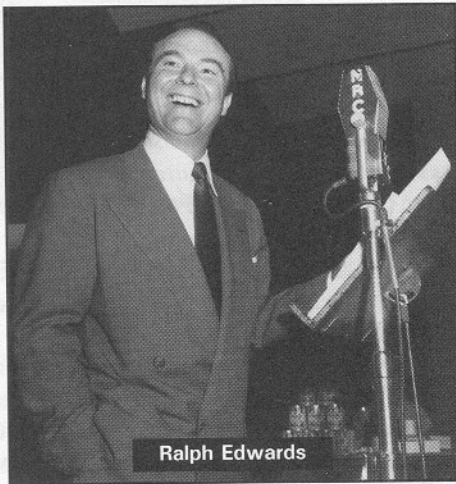
Imagine yourself seated in a studio audience anticipating the start of a live radio performance of one of America's most electrifying half-hours. The announcer is just completing his warm-ups, having encouraged hundreds of spectators to ebulliently respond to some anticipated zany antics planned for the night's weekly broadcast.

In a final prelude, a couple of gentlemen (most likely servicemen in uniform) are plucked from the studio audience and brought onstage.

Following a brief interview they're invited to compete against each other for a cash prize. Their instructions are to fetch articles of women's clothing from a nearby trunk and put them on over their uniforms. The object of the exercise is to determine who can complete his outfit first.

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The exhibition is precisely timed. Just as one of the contestants begins to wiggle into a girdle — with the studio audience convulsing into gales of laughter approaching near hysteria — the sweep second hand of a big wall clock reaches the top of the half-hour. At precisely that instant an engineer throws a switch and this undisciplined mayhem bursts onto the national airwaves. The show's announcer gleefully informs millions of fans aside their radios nationwide:



Ralph Edwards

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"Hello there! We've been waiting for you! It's time to play Truth . . . or Consequences!" A hasty rendition of "Merrily We Roll Along" in glissando-like form erupts from the studio console, confirmation that — once again — listeners coast to coast have tuned in to the jocularity and bedlam they expect from *Truth or Consequences*. Now, fast forward to the present.

Media consultant Leonard Maltin refers to this show's opening as "the most memorable — and consistent — audience reaction in the history of radio."

While deprived of both audible and vi-

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sual accounts of what has caused such an explosion in a broadcast studio, the program's legions of fans are, nonetheless, eager to lay aside their cares for a half-hour.

Just what was [it] that had so much of the country glued to its radio sets during the 1940s and — to a lesser extent — the 1950s? One national magazine observed audiences being led to a sphere where “demented situations” derived “lots of fun” while simultaneously appearing as “the essence of normality.”

The mania consisted of stunts such as substituting a trained seal onstage for a man's wife. The blindfolded husband was to be tested on his ability to climb into bed late at night without waking his “wife.” While comforting his bed partner, he snuggled close, soothing “her” skin. During the upheaval, the seal retorted with grunts as the studio audience exploded into raucous pandemonium.

One Halloween Edwards sent an unsuspecting lady on a haunted house venture away from the studio (she was blindfolded, just as he often liked to disperse contestants). If she could correctly guess where she was upon her arrival, she'd earn a hundred dollar bill. After the woman departed from the studio, the sly-as-a-fox Edwards joyously affirmed: “Oh, what's gonna happen to her!” He confessed that the show had worked with the lady's husband without her knowledge. Staffers transformed their home into a scary cavern with recorded ghost screams and hideous monster trappings. Then Edwards quipped, a tinge of madness in his exuberance: “Aren't we devils?” (It was a catchphrase he employed at least once on virtually every show that quickly became part of the national lexicon. With some regularity, for years the query fell from the lips of millions of fans.)

To the contestant, still blindfolded near the end of the program, had no idea where she was but allowed that it “smells like a brewery in here!” The studio audience bellowed ecstatically, and for being a good sport, Edwards gave the contestant the hundred dollars anyway.

Born on a ranch in northern Colorado near the little hamlet of Merino on June 13, 1913, as a youngster Edwards milked four cows twice daily. He also made frequent pack trips into the Rockies during boyhood. At age 12, when the Edwardses relocated to California, young Ralph ceded his love of outdoor camping to the Sierra Nevada range. Years later, after becoming a national radio celebrity, he reflected on those days:

Many were the rainy nights when mother and dad and three of us boys racked our brains over guessing games, dressed up for Charades, spun scary stories for Ghosts, but the best nights of all were with a gang around when we sing-songed “Heavy Heavy Hangs Over Thy Head . . . Is it Fine or Superfine? Tell the Truth or pay the consequences.”

In those experiences enacting some variation of an old parlor game commonly known as Forfeit, the competition usually called for holding some familiar object over the head of the player who was designated “it.” “It” couldn't see the object, of course. Given clues, if “it” was unable to identify the article — or sometimes answer a silly question — he or she had to pay the consequences: simplified, of course, like kissing a boy or girl of the opposite gender from a nearby ranch.

Unknown to the Edwardses then was that that little pastime would have a teeming effect upon members of their household for years to come. But lest we get ahead of the story, nearly two decades elapsed before Forfeit was to dazzle Americans coast to coast, catapulting young Ralph into in-



Ralph Edwards

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stant stardom.

By 1930 the youth was pursuing radio as a vocation, plying his abilities at a nearby Oakland station as a writer, actor and announcer. There he gained acumen that was to sustain him for the rest of his working life. Honing new skills, he soon became a familiar voice to listeners of that city's station KROW. Simultaneously, he was working at KPRC in San Francisco and pursuing a bachelor's degree at the University of California, Berkeley, a diploma he was awarded in 1935. At Berkeley Edwards was active in the drama department. During his enrollment he appeared in practically every little theater production.

Single, young Edwards was enamored by the prospects of a lifetime investment in network radio. At age 22, in 1935 he decided to cast his lot in New York City. Thumbing his way across the continent with a few greenbacks in his jeans, he soon reached his destination. There he found

sleeping quarters in a Manhattan chapel while often accepting meals from Bowery soup kitchens.

Remaining focused, however, he lined up several radio auditions. In a short while he was appearing on network shows like *Renfrew of the Mounted* and *Stoopnagle and Budd*. Not much later, CBS put out the word that it was hiring a staff announcer; and 70 aspirants showed up, Edwards among them. He won the spot and in a brief span found himself a rising interlocutor on as many as 45 shows weekly including: *Against the Storm*, *Coast to Coast on a Bus*, *A Dream Comes True*, *The Gospel Singer*, *The Gumps*, *The Horn and Hardart Children's Hour*, *Life Can Be Beautiful*, *Major Bowes' Original Amateur Hour*, *The Phil Baker Show*, *Town Hall Tonight* and *Vic and Sade*.

One radio biographer noted that Edwards' cordial approach to commercials on the daytime soap operas "all but revolutionized" announcing in that period. The effusive host inserted "conversational punctuation" into advertising copy, almost as if addressing each feminine listener individually. On one show, for instance, he ad-libbed this discourse:

You know, when you listen to Life Can Be Beautiful, you get the feeling that Chi Chi and Papa David and all the others are sort of like old friends. Don't you think that's the way it is? Friends that you look forward to visiting with every day. Now, I never heard of anybody looking forward to dishwashing, but [chortle] just the same, I know a lot of you feel friendly to the soap that helps your hands look nice and gives you speedy suds at the same time. Yes, Ma'am, I mean good old Ivory Flakes. . . .

The shows Edwards appeared on provided him with a quite comfortable living

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in that Depression-recovery era. He admitted later that his annual salary by that time exceeded \$50,000. At one point he suggested that his voice introduced more commercial programs than anybody else on the air. Despite such good fortune, however, he was a malcontent. Years later he would muse: "I didn't want to be just an announcer."

Having probed the successes of those who had risen to the forefront of broadcasting careers, he was persuaded that performers who took a hand in developing unique program styles gained status among radio's well-heeled royalty. The best of all possible worlds, Edwards thought, would be to prove himself as an innovative program producer. Such an opportunity might allow him to concentrate on only one or two primary efforts rather than running from show to show throughout the workday.

Edwards believed that the risk of giving up his secure and lucrative commitments would be the right thing to do in exchange for an opportunity to achieve his dream. Through the grapevine he learned in 1939 that one of radio's most respected underwriters, the Procter and Gamble Company — which was paying the bills for several of the shows on which he was then working — was searching for an innovative concept for a nighttime radio series.

Edwards wracked his brain trying to think of a format that had never been tried on the air. Some years later he recalled the exact time and place that inspiration hit him and *Truth or Consequences* was born. He had just arrived at home from the studios late one Thursday afternoon in November 1939. Having thought for weeks of little else beyond dreaming up a new show, suddenly — in the company of his young bride, Barbara, and her parents, who were

in New York on a visit — he remembered the old parlor game his family had played back in Colorado: Forfeit. While the game hadn't been enacted before an audience, Edwards sensed that people watching it in a studio — and millions at home transferring the action in their minds — would love it.

He got on the phone with John MacMillan, the radio kingpin of the Compton Advertising agency, and exuberantly shared his idea. MacMillan questioned: "When can you audition it?" Edwards replied that he could have something together within two or three weeks; MacMillan asked if he could do it by Sunday, three days hence. Edwards gulped, yet readily agreed.

That night he dispatched a buddy (Jack Farnell) from Oakland, who was then in New York, to the public library to search for questions. In the meantime Barbara, her parents and Ralph began thinking up consequences. The following day — in between his radio stints on *Life Can Be Beautiful*, *Against the Storm* and *The Gospel Singer* — he arranged for the studio audience of *The Horn and Hardart Children's Hour* program, which he was then emceeing, to remain an extra 45 minutes after Sunday morning's show. They would provide the live audience he needed for an audition performance.

He engaged Andre Baruch, with whom he had shared an apartment in their bachelor days, and his wife Bea Wain to make a celebrity appearance on the show. On Saturday night he imposed on some University of California chums who were living in the area. Inviting them to supper, he led them to play *Truth or Consequences* after dinner, a kind of "dress rehearsal" for the next day's trial run.

A transcription disc of the audition, which came off without a hitch, was given to Compton executives on Monday. They

responded favorably and shipped it off to Cincinnati for reactions from Procter and Gamble's sensitive ears. A green light wasn't long in arriving. Within four months *Truth or Consequences* hit the airwaves, premiering for Ivory soap on March 23, 1940 for 30 minutes over the Columbia Broadcasting System. It was the start of a broadcasting venture that would entertain American audiences for five decades. And for his efforts, Edwards — the man who had risked career and livelihood for a shot as a program creator, owner, producer, writer and master of ceremonies —



Truth or Consequences

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would be certified as radio's youngest entrepreneur.

The exhibition itself was to carry quiz programs to an altogether new plateau. Simple in concept, it decreed that contestants would attempt to answer an inquisition for which they were almost never prepared. There were impractical queries like:

"Why is a hunting license just like a marriage license?"

Answer: "It entitles you to one deer and no more."

(or) "Why would anybody bring a bottle of milk to a poker game?"

Answer: "To feed the kitty."

For a rare answer that was accepted by

the judges, contestants were paid a handsome \$15. But as rapidly as a player missed a question, sound effects technician Bob Prescott pressed a button that created a tone that audiences came to anticipate, soon identified as "Beulah the Buzzer." This reverberation indicated that a wrong response

had been given and a penalty must be paid. The fun really started then.

Numerous contestants admitted that they missed their questions on purpose in order to carry the exposition to its ultimate conclusion. As a rule they wound up as the dupe of some elaborate practical joke that the show's cre-

ative staff had dreamed up.

On a 1948 outing, for instance, Edwards told Mrs. Earl Peterson of Milwaukee, Wisconsin that a psychic would reveal her future to her that evening. She was sent offstage to retrieve a crystal ball that the clairvoyant was to use. But while she was out of earshot, Edwards quipped: "Oooooooo — what's gonna happen to her!" It was another of his favorite catchphrases that he introduced once or twice on every show. He apprised the studio and radio audiences that, offstage, the contestant was being told that her husband would appear in disguise as the fortune-teller. Each time he correctly answered one

of her questions, she was to kiss him. With flippancy in his voice, Edwards chortled: "What she doesn't know is . . . we're substituting actor Boris Karloff for her husband!"

Peterson, the husband, had supplied the answers to questions his wife was to ask the medium. Wearing heavy camouflage, Karloff would offer memorized replies to her queries, receiving a kiss for his efforts. The audience expectantly awaited the outcome as Edwards exclaimed with glee: "Aren't we devils?"

The bedevilment transpired and Mrs. Peterson wasn't surprised when the seer responded perfectly to every inquiry. In fact, with each query the studio audience broke into a convulsive, boisterous crescendo. After the final inquisition and smooch, Edwards asked: "Mrs. Peterson, do you think your husband would mind your kissing this total stranger?"

"No," she replied confidently, "I knew it was him all the time. . . . I know those lips." The audience roared.

During a slight dip in the gales of laughter, Edwards announced, "OK, swami, go ahead and remove your beard and turban; she knew it was you all the time." Momentarily, the contestant nearly passed out as she screamed: "It's Boris Karloff!"

The contagious response of the studio audience must have been enough to satisfy the listeners at home who could only visualize the gag. That was the beauty of radio, of course. In the theater of the mind, everyone was free to imagine precisely how a stunt was being played out in a studio far away.

The format for *Truth or Consequences* was usually blocked out a month or so in advance. While Edwards himself thought up many of the stunts, he was abetted by what he labeled as the show's "brain trust."

In addition to its creator, this compelling assemblage included Phil Davis, who joined the ranks after the initial year on the air and who became chief idea developer; Al Paschall, the program's production manager, who came aboard only four weeks after the debut; and a quartet of gag writers — Bill Burch, Ralph's brother Paul, Mort Lewis and Mel Vickland. The brain trust normally met every Tuesday to consider potential consequences.

Beyond all of the zany ideas this bunch proffered over the long run, it unquestionably gained more plaudits for the show via a series of stunts that made utterly good sense. Over several seasons a procession of hidden celebrity identities in conjunction with a few noble charitable causes was introduced. Some of the nation's attention was riveted to the show as the sequences grabbed news headlines. One radio historian suggested that, through such efforts, the series "electrified the country."

It all began as a gag on the program of December 29, 1945. Edwards tells about it in his own words:

I had got so fed up with radio programs which asked a contestant some first grade question like what is the capital of the United States and rewarded a correct answer with a gift of a Cadillac, that I decided to run a give-away to end all give-aways. . . . I felt then, and I still do, that a radio show which cannot hold an audience on the basis of its entertainment value should not be on the air.

He penned a limerick that was marinated in clues:

*Hickory dickory dock,
The hands went round the clock
The clock struck ten
Lights out
Goodnight.*

An unidentified reader (prizefighter Jack Dempsey) offered this jingle every Saturday night for several weeks. Various con-



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in good conscience, go along with a technique which turned radio into an oversized grab bag.

The months between the Dempsey contest and our Mrs. Hush game with Clara Bow were an agony of conferences with lawyers, United States government legal experts, and ultimately — for I had found a ‘right reason’ for the contests — with officials of the March of Dimes.

The contests continued but for worthy endeavors.

The subsequent “Mrs. Hush” competition featuring silent

testants were given an opportunity to identify the man whom Edwards called “Mr. Hush.” A small jackpot of merchandise grew every week as participants failed in their efforts to name the luminary. Eventually, the “crackpot jackpot” reached \$13,500, a hefty sum by mid 1940s standards. At that point a Navy lieutenant, Ensign Richard Bartholomew of Fayetteville, Arkansas, guessed the name of Dempsey and claimed the prizes. Radio jackpots often included automobiles, travel vouchers, airplanes, motorboats, house trailers, mink coats and jewelry among their stashes, incidentally. By then *Truth or Consequences* had attracted scores of new listeners who were clamoring for more guessing games. Edwards recalled a personal inner struggle that such heady success brought him.

I couldn't let them down. Nor could I,

screen star Bow focused on the concern of many Americans who could be motivated to assist in the fight to end the crippling disease known as infantile paralysis or poliomyelitis, then sweeping the nation. The March of Dimes was a charitable foundation whose sole mission was to raise donations to conquer the dreaded scourge.

By then the emphasis for these mystery celebrity events had shifted from studio participants to the millions who were hearing the show on radio. Listeners could voluntarily submit donations while attempting to identify “Mrs. Hush.” All they had to do was to complete the following statement in 25 words or less: “We should all support the March of Dimes because. . .”

From the mail each week the contest judges drew a select number of “best entries.” This qualified their writers to be eligible for a possible telephone call from

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Edwards while on the air the following Saturday night. If no one who was interviewed could name the mystery celebrity during a show, new clues would be given and more prizes added to the jackpot that the eventual winner would receive. The fans at home were given added opportunities to be called. They could send in new statements each week and could add March of Dimes donations with it if they wished.

There was no rush to reach the outcome, of course. Why would there be? The participants were having fun while millions of listeners were holding their breath; the March of Dimes was reaping tangible benefits, eventually topping \$545,000 directly from this appeal; and the show was once again harvesting favorable treatment in the news media coast to coast.

By the time Mrs. William H. McCormick figured out at last that the hidden identity belonged to Bow, which earned McCormick \$17,590 in merchandise, Edwards realized he had a good thing going that couldn't be soon dismissed. "I have no right to discard an idea which can do this especially when it gives half the people of the country a wonderful time besides," he announced. More mystery celebrity contests followed.

Dancer Martha Graham was eventually identified as "Miss Hush" by a listener who claimed over \$21,000 in prizes. Another \$672,000 went to March of Dimes coffers.

What had been originally intended as a satire of the high stakes competitions on radio had actually become broadcasting's biggest giveaway. The stash secured by Mrs. Florence Hubbard for naming Jack Benny as the "Walking Man," a 1947 contest that transfixed the nation's listeners for weeks, was typical. Her booty would gladden the heart of any Internal Revenue Service official while at the same time posing

the query: What's the beneficiary, the American Heart Association, getting out of all of this? (Actually, the AHA amassed more than \$1.5 million from the contest, although anyone toting up the prizes while forgetting they were donated might have had pause to wonder. The widowed Mrs. Hubbard, age 68, a \$30-a-week sales clerk for Chicago's Carson-Pirie-Scott department store, was encumbered with all of the ensuing following her on-air revelation:

Bendix home laundry (including washer, dryer and automatic ironer)

\$1,000 diamond and ruby Bulova watch
4-door Cadillac sedan

Tappan gas kitchen range

16mm motion picture sound projector and screen with a print of the Hal Wallis production "I Walk Alone" and delivery of a Motion Picture of the Month for one year

Two-week vacation for two from any place in the U. S. to Union Pacific's Sun Valley, Idaho, all expenses paid

\$1,000 J. R. Wood and Sons art-carved diamond ring

Electrolux vacuum cleaner and all the attachments

1948 RCA Victor console FM-AM radio and phonograph combination and TV set in a single cabinet

Servel silent gas refrigerator

Art Craft all metal venetian blinds for windows throughout the entire home

Sherwin-Williams agreed to paint the house inside and out, paint included

Complete wardrobe of women's clothes for every season of the year designed by Faye Foster consisting of street dresses, beach wear and play clothes

Frigidaire home freezer filled with Bird's Eye frozen foods

Luskum Silvair all metal airplane

Kitchen and bathroom completely installed with ceramic tile by the Pomona Tile Manufacturing Company

Dining room and two bedrooms filled with Idaho Pine furniture

\$2,400 deluxe 3-room Normel trailer coach equipped with modern kitchen and sleeping quarters for four

Remington Rand noiseless model 7 typewriter

14-foot Aluma Craft boat complete with

TRUTH OR CONSEQUENCES

Something Really New
1946 FORD Sportsman CONVERTIBLE



Truth or Consequences! Ralph Edwards and Mrs. William H. McCormick, winner of the Mrs. Hush Contest, with \$17,590 in prizes

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Champion outboard motor

*\$1,000 full-length Persian lamb coat
designed by furrier Max Foyer*

*Two-year supply of Pepperell sheets and
pillowcases for every bed in the house*

*Choice of \$500 worth of Westinghouse
electric home appliances*

Story and Clark piano

*Universal electric blankets for every bed in
the house*

*Three Coronada air-cooled summer suits for
every man in the immediate family*

*Roger and Company desk console Sew-Gem
electric sewing machine*

Even a pauper could have turned into a princess with spoils like these! The generous publicity to the providers was worth far more than the minimal outlay for prizes that they surrendered, while millions reveled in that extensive list as it was read aloud every Saturday night for months.

The winners of such competitions received not only cash and merchandise jack-

pots but turned into luminaries themselves. The aforementioned Mrs. Hubbard acquired 40 marriage proposals from her instant fame and fortune. Still others achieved celebrated status within their own local communities.

When Jack Benny was identified as the "Walking Man," Edwards explained that the comedian hailed originally from Waukegan, Illinois meaning 'walk again' "as named by the Indians." As part of her quick rise to luster, Mrs. Hubbard, who unmasked Benny, was invited to appear on the following Saturday night's broadcast of *Truth or Consequences*. Later, speaking on the air with Edwards from his secret hideaway, Benny allowed to tumultuous studio cackling: "I'd like to get Mrs. Hubbard as a guest on my show the following Sunday night. And if we can't get her, Ralph, would you see if you can get Carson, Pirie or Scott?" → → →

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The American Heart Association gained national acclaim for the first time in its brief history when it received the proceeds from a trio of *Truth or Consequences* mystery celebrity competitions. In excess of \$2.5 million was raised from endeavors involving the "Walking Man" (comic Benny), "Whispering Woman" (vocalist Jeanette MacDonald) and "Mr. Heartbeat" (poet Edgar A. Guest). A "Mr. and Mrs. Hush" campaign (featuring musicians Moss Hart and Kitty Carlisle) enriched the coffers of the Arthritis Foundation. By late 1948 the Mental Health Drive was the program's recipient of choice during a "Papa and Mama Hush" competition (involving dancers Yolanda and Velez).

Ralph Edwards Productions in Hollywood reported that *Truth or Consequences'* radio efforts ultimately tallied \$22 million

for munificent intents.

Interestingly, when the show's audition pilot was done in early 1940 it was recorded on a transcription disc as there was no tape at that time. Even after the advent of tape NBC didn't allow its use for many years. (Among other reasons, there was a prevailing feeling in the industry that a certain amount of spontaneity would dissolve if a show were taped ahead of time.) Instead, *Truth or Consequences* was initially performed in New York and, three hours later, aired a similar live show from New York to the West Coast. The second performance included the same acts as on the earlier broadcast but with different contestants. In 1945 when the program began originating from Hollywood a live show was performed for the East Coast with a live show as before for the West Coast three hours later. Again, the same acts were aired with different contestants.

Not until October 4, 1947 did NBC permit the show to replay the original live show to the West Coast. And it was June 9, 1949 when such programs were allowed to be taped for broadcast, yet then only under extreme circumstances. Even the April 1, 1950 outing from *Truth or Consequences*, New Mexico was done live. Beginning with the 1950-51 radio season the series was at last aired live on tape.

Truth or Consequences made several forays into early television that gave it some fleeting notoriety, too. An initial test on New York's WNBT-TV on July 1, 1941 acknowledged the presence of cameras with gags that offered a visual orientation. One player's consequence, for example, was to



Truth or Consequences
Ralph Edwards with Jack
Benny, the 'Walking Man'

wear a grass skirt and dance the hula.

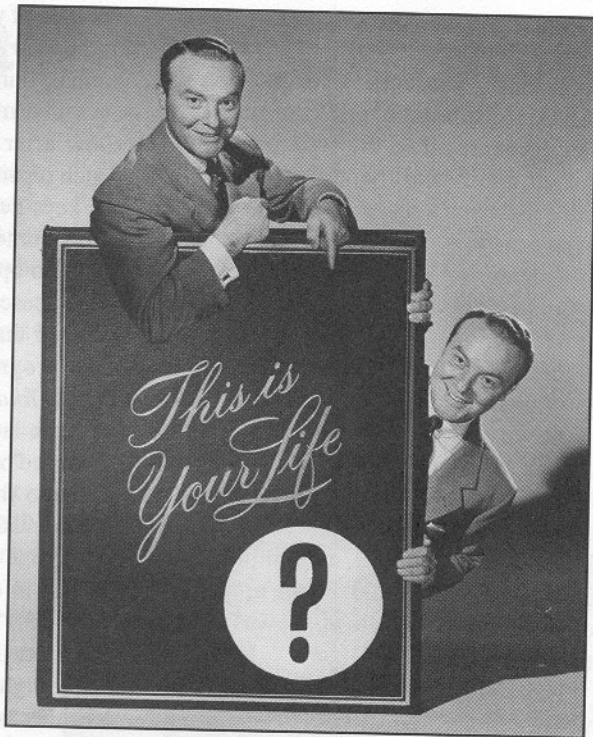
Was this a foretaste of things to come?

Truth or Consequences premiered to a weekly television audience... on September 7, 1950 over CBS. It continued for a single season to June 7, 1951. Two NBC-TV nighttime renditions appeared next, from May 18, 1954 to September 28, 1956, and from December 13, 1957 to June 6, 1958.

A weekday NBC-TV version ran at varied hours from mid-mornings to late afternoons with only a couple of brief interruptions between December 31, 1956 and September 24, 1965.

While Ralph Edwards was the only host of the radio show across its 16 years, by the time the program appeared on NBC-TV in 1954, he was fully ensconced in *This Is Your Life*, a spinoff from the radio series. *Truth or Consequences* owner Edwards hired *Queen for a Day* host Jack Bailey as emcee of the video show. When Bailey subsequently departed, Steve Dunne was given the nod for the 1957-58 nighttime version.

In the meantime, in December 1956 Edwards had been charmed by the appealing voice of a Pasadena, California radio audience participation host, whose name and station call letters he failed to get other than "Bob." He put his telephone operator, Billie Clevinger, on the trail. Working over the weekend, she turned up Bob Barker, then an unknown figure beyond the immediate vicinity. Edwards called him and asked him to drop by "at his convenience." Twenty minutes later Barker turned up and Edwards hired the small time emcee for a five-day-a-week daytime ver-



sion of *Truth or Consequences*, which he had just sold to NBC-TV. That series lasted until 1965. Then the show went live on tape via syndication, from 1965-75, with two additional years in reruns. By that time, Barker was also well entrenched in *The Price is Right*.

But the entrepreneurial spirit of Ralph Edwards wasn't done yet.

This Is Your Life, the first of the "reality" shows, had its origins in an April 27, 1946 *Truth or Consequences* exhibition. A young ex-Marine, Lawrence Trantor of Murray, Utah, who had been wounded at Luzon and was paralyzed below the waist, was brought face-to-face with people who had touched his life in meaningful ways. One by one he was reunited onstage with old friends, family and neighbors. But that was only half the story. Knowing of Edwards' penchant for assisting worthy intents, U. S. General Omar Bradley asked him to do something for returning disabled

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servicemen, particularly for paraplegics. "Many are without hope," confirmed Bradley, "and are afraid they will be a burden to their family and friends." Edwards decided to devote a segment of *Truth or Consequences* to wounded veterans, with the show featuring Trantor as a result.

Bradley's aim was to help such men return to civilian life and that meant looking to the future. While hospitalized, Trantor had taken up the hobby of watch repair. Aware of that, Edwards made a proposal to him: working with the Bulova Watch Company, Edwards arranged for the show to send Trantor to a Bulova School of Watchmaking. When he completed the course, the show would set him up in a jewelry store in his hometown. It was an offer the vet could hardly refuse.

That chapter struck a favorable response with audience and cast alike. During the Christmas season of 1947 the program saluted another veteran, Hubert Smith, a Greeneville, Tennessee paraplegic, then confined at the Long Beach (California) Naval Hospital. Via a three-way remote, from his hospital bedside the wounded soldier visited scenes of his youth — his high school, a corner drug store, his church and his grandmother's home. He spoke with teachers, his doctor, pastor, a clerk at the Greeneville general store and classmates at the school who sang Christmas carols to him. Culminating this feel-good surprise, the show flew the recruit's mother, father and girlfriend to California to spend the holidays with him.

"This boy's story touched the hearts of America, as it had touched ours — and our country is rich in these stories," Edwards later concluded. "Our country, I have come to believe . . . , is richest of all in its people."

And what of Lawrence Trantor, the vet who was sent to Bulova's school? In 1948,

a couple of years after he initially appeared on *Truth or Consequences*, the wheelchair-bound young man, by then accompanied by a charming redhead, returned to the show after completion of his course in watch repair. Edwards presented him with the keys he had been promised to a store in his hometown, plus an inventory and a check to open a bank account.

As these accounts unfolded, Edwards realized that he had tumbled onto an unused programming concept, resulting in *This Is Your Life*. The show was launched on radio later in 1948.

Hosted by Edwards, *This Is Your Life* was on radio from 1948-50 before moving to TV in 1950. It aired on the small screen in primetime from 1950-51, 1954-56, 1957-58 and in daytime from 1956-59 and late 1959-65. The show was seen in syndication from 1966-75, 1977-78 and 1987-88. It highlighted incidents in the lives of celebrities as well as ordinary citizens. Appearances were secretly and elaborately choreographed in order to realize the ultimate element of surprise when people learned on the air that they were to be featured subjects. Few shows exceeded it in reaching its compelling human-interest levels.

Truth or Consequences, the granddaddy of the stunt shows on radio and television, helped Americans overcome any tendency they might have had to take life seriously. While its early years overlapped one of the most traumatic periods in the nation's history, the series encouraged people to experience the sunny side of life. As it brought listeners to the peak of insanity, this zany, riotous barrel of laughs glued 20 million individuals to their radio sets every Saturday night for 10 years. ■

Tune in TWTD October 6 to hear a pair of consecutive Truth or Consequences programs from 1947.