

YOKEL BOY MAKES GOOD

REPRINT from 1939 Radio Magazine

BOB BURNS, the world traveler who got rich acting a hick, reckoned the jig was up in 1930 when he flopped as flat as a Snazzy batter-cake in his first picture. But his counselor, Will Rogers, saw that he got a few bits in some Rogers pictures. He picked up a few dollars in "The Connecticut Yankee" and "Young As You Feel."

Brother Burns wasn't feeling so young. He was thirty-four and broke and he had a wife and a son. The family was in Lancaster with Mrs. Burns' folks. And if Robin Burn, the Arkansas gypsy, wasn't a failure then neither was Napoleon after Waterloo.

Fox couldn't use him any more and didn't lift his option. Over at Universal, they were making a shanty-boat picture, "Heaven on Earth." It reminded Bob of the Arkansas River, chock beer, the Ozarks, Van Buren, and heaven on earth. He got a job as dialect coach for the picture and soon could afford coffee with his hamburgers. He sent for his family and they got a \$22.50-a-month apartment in Hollywood and were very happy. It didn't take much money to make Bob happy, only enough to keep his stomach from growling. He never had been rich and was content with a living.

At Universal, he made many friends, including Lew Ayres, who still is a close friend. His friends didn't know

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BOB BURNS

Bob was worried. He never told his troubles. But he knew he couldn't last teaching folks his brand of humor and, sure enough, Universal washed him up and he soon was broke again.

Somebody told him to try radio. But radio said he was no good. He got an audition at KNX in Los Angeles and tried a mess called "Gawkin' Around." It was the same humor you hear from him now. The radio head man said, "We'll let you know if anything turns up." It didn't. Not there. Recently the studio sent Burns the record file of his audition. That station could have grabbed him for a meal ticket.

He got placed at Station KFI, but with no salary. He was called Colonel Blaine in a sort of a showboat revue. The sponsors didn't pay any attention to the Colonel. He also broadcast, for nothing, with the Sunday Night Fun Factory. He was having fun, all right, but try and eat it!

His boy was getting big. Mister Robin Burn was skidding down the ladder and was passing the bottom rung when he reached out and got another toe-hold. The Fun Factory began paying off. Bob got \$5 a performance. A

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fat fellow named Don Wilson was emcee. He made more. It took more to keep him ticking. Homer Canfield was on the show, too. He got \$7.50. Burns' show was just as it is now—a few stories and the bazooka spasm.

His wife never came to the studio. She stayed home and listened and criticized him when he got home. The Burnses lived in a duplex, property of the Foster family, and Harriet Foster was Bob's landlady, sort of. She and Betty Burns were always running around together. They were closer than sisters, for they never fussed. Bob liked Harriet, too. They kidded each other a lot, and she ate snacks over at the Burns' side of the duplex after Bob's broadcasts. Sometimes the Burnses stepped to the next door and ate with the Fosters.

The Gilmore Circus picked him up in 1932 and got him a blackface role on its KFI show. He was called Soda Pop and collected \$20 a week! He also played at clubs, or anywhere, to make ends meet. Duke Attebury, now Burns' writer, remembers those days. Attebury was making \$225 a week putting the circus together. He and Bob were at a party one night and Bob didn't have time to get into blackface before his appearance, and, at Attebury's suggestion, went on straight. He clicked. Soon thereafter Rudy Vallee was in town, auditioned him, tagged him as okay, and then forgot about him. Vallee was having lady-troubles and had to get back to New York.

Bob went back to his \$20 job. Next he got a little work in a program called "High Jinks" and Andy Devine heard him. He and Devine were pals. Bob had just finished work one night when Devine called him. "I'm over at Bing Crosby's and he likes you swell. He wants to meet you tomorrow."

Bing was plugging Woodbury Soap. He plugged Bob, too. But Woodbury said he wouldn't do. "We want names," said the soap boys. "Burns is not a name." (There was a poet by that name who did all right. He probably would have flopped on radio, too.)

Mrs. Burns and her husband sat up late that night. They were at the end of their rope. She said, "If you have

to have a name, go to New York and get one. I can go home. Bob (the son) and I will be all right."

"Okay, honey," said Bob.

But Betty didn't go home. With Harriet Foster next door, she knew she and the boy could make out. Bob got a third-hand automobile and headed for New York. He had his bazooka. He also had a card and the name of a J. Walter Thompson agency man. He had bumped into the man and the fellow had said, as they do, "Call me up if you ever get to New York."

Bob had memorized the telephone number, quite a feat, and called it one day by accident. But a nickel investment wasn't to be ignored, so he asked for the man and got him. The fellow remembered Bob, also that Rudy Vallee had okayed him.

"I've come to New York to go on the Rudy Vallee program," said Bob. "Swell," said the agency fellow, and Burns almost collapsed.

But he went on—and chalk up another discovery for Vallee.

He got \$150 for the appearance. His first crack was:

"My folks down in Arkansas will be disappointed. You see, I came to New York to get on one of these here amateur shows. But it's so darn hard to get on one of them amateur programs unless you are known."

He blew the bazooka, and Fortune grinned.

The next day he appeared at the agency and tossed some papers on the desk of Vallee's producer. "That's my script for the next show," said Burns. He was used on four Vallee shows. Paul Whiteman was selling Kraft cheese in those days and hired Bob for eight weeks. Bob had bazookaed for Paul before, when he was fresh from France.

Then bingo! Bing Crosby and Paul Whiteman swapped sponsors and Crosby telephoned Bob. "Come on out here. You are on my show. Pay you \$500 a week."

An agency took him under its wing. It's the same agency that had given him the go-by before, the same folks to whom Bob had said, "Just wait, boys. You'll want me some day."

The team of Crosby and Burns, of course, made radio history. Then the



BOB BURNS

movies snapped him up and whooped that the wise men had made another discovery! Ho hum.

There is no doubt that at first Bob was slated to take Will Rogers' place. He knew it couldn't be done. "Nobody can do that," he said.

He also was typed as a foil for Crosby.

Then somebody really had an idea, cast him as the Arkansas Traveller, and he has been traveling ever since. He is the Arkansas Traveller.

The next time he returned to Van Buren, he could have had the place, wrapped in cellophane. He was our boy! The tourists were coming. His parents had died. The governor of the state, who was president of the University when Bob had flunked there, welcomed him and made a speech, a hum-dinger, too. He said Bob was a fine boy. He had always known it. Bob Burns was past forty then! The high school said he was a fine boy, too. The high school even gave him that diploma.

In 1936 he was on top of the heap. He and Betty Burns moved from that \$22.50-a-month apartment. For the first time in her life, Mrs. Burns didn't have to worry. Then she died suddenly.

Bob couldn't tell his son at first. Bob and his boy had never been very close,

neither had Bob and his father. Burns had been so busy trying to get ahead that he hadn't taken very much time with the youngster. They got close together the day Mrs. Burns died. "We are all each other has got," Big Bob told Little Bob. "We've got to stick together."

And they have.

A year later, he married Harriet Foster. It was natural. Harriet and Betty had been very close. She had helped Bob with his early struggles and had become his secretary.

"Some folks wonder why I married my secretary so soon after Betty's death," Bob said. (It's none of "some folks'" cock-eyed business, Mr. and Mrs. Burns.)

"I was the loneliest man in this town after Betty died. Betty and Harriet had been mighty close friends. Harriet kept working with me, as my secretary. When my boy needed a mother's hand, Harriet gave it to him. When we decided to get married, I told her, 'We can keep Betty with us always, in our hearts.' And we have."

He had bought his swanky Bel Air home. He was on top, all right. He and his son were close. He had all the money the family needed. He and Harriet had a baby. The only regret he had was that Betty hadn't lived to share his triumph. She had worked hard with him, and it was mean of the fates to snatch her just before things got easy for her.

He enjoys his radio work. The Kraft program is the happiest show on the air. Everybody works together and has fun. There is no jealousy, no bickerings. Bob reports for rehearsals about 2 p.m. on Thursdays and runs through the script with Bing. Then he goes through the music with John Scott Trotter and rehearses his bazooka solo. At about 4 p.m. he goes into a huddle with his writer, Duke Attebury, and they think up something for Bob to say. He takes a few notes, just in case. Three hours later he is on the air.

A recording company records his chatter and his wife transcribes it, in case he should need it later.

He is a very careful dresser and kept his pants pressed even back when he had to sleep on them. He buys his own clothes and his taste is conservative. His favorite expressions are "Sometimes I get so discouraged"—

COVER STORY

"If I live to be a thousand years old"—"Well now, I'll tell you." His newspaper column is called "Well, I'll tell you."

HE INSISTS on his bazooka-case standing at his right side when he broadcasts, and as he talks his fingers beat a tattoo on the case. He purses his lips and sticks his tongue in his left cheek when he begins to tell a whopper. He is a left ear-lobe scratcher, an inveterate pipe-smoker and a feet-on-the-desk fellow.

He is very even tempered, but will fight if a man wants trouble. He's a tough bargainer. Bob cannot eat sweets of any kind. They throw him. A trick stomach makes him sick if he takes even one bite of candy. He enjoys barbecue, and often cooks his own meats outside. He goes for detective stories and hobby-books, and his hobbies include bugs, sailing and hunting. He sleeps well. He golfs in the 80's and is a good fisherman.

Burns' pets include a Yorkshire terrier, a couple of black Irish terrier-cocker crosses, a half-dozen Angora rabbits, a donkey and the bazooka.

He is honorary mayor of Canoga Park, where he owns a ranch. He owns

another ranch in San Fernando Valley and several farms in Arkansas. He and his wife invest their money in real estate. They are shrewd traders and watch the papers. When they see a good piece of land facing foreclosure, they grab it. Usually they improve it and rent it. They try to keep their rents low. Bob's ambition is to own a string of small houses to be rented to deserving people at low rent.

His radio income is approximately \$4,000 a week. Paramount pays him \$60,000 a picture for three pictures a year, and he generally picks up another \$75,000 from another company. His syndicated column is supposed to fetch him \$25,000.

Since Amos 'n' Andy went over to CBS, Bob's material is the only stuff broadcast over NBC that is not first submitted to the continuity department. They know Bob's stories will be clean. He never gambles or drinks. He spends most of his spare time with his family. He hates sham and he and his wife just don't mix with the Hollywood folks.

Lew Ayres and Bob have been fast friends for eight years. "Bob is much more humorous in real life than on the screen or radio."

Evans Plummer of Hollywood's RADIO GUIDE staff paid Burns the best tribute. In gathering material for this piece, he wrote, "Bob's closest friends are Abe Lastfogel of the William Morris office, Duke Attebury, Bing Crosby, Andy Devine, Lew Ayres and Ben Alexander. I can't find any enemies."

And that, folks, is a mouthful—in Hollywood.

Chuck Schaden's



SPEAKING OF RADIO

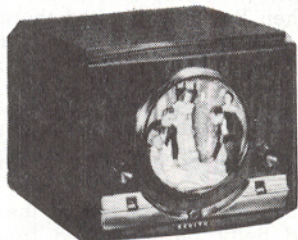
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