



## Listeners Choose 20 Best Old Time Radio Shows Of the 20th Century

As we approach the year 2000, it seems that everyone is compiling lists of "the best," "the most," "the outstanding" everything, and so we thought we, too, should jump on the Millennium Bandwagon.

Last May we asked listeners of our *Those Were The Days* program to select the twenty best old time radio shows of the Twentieth Century.

This was, of course, not to be a scientific poll, just a more or less spontaneous, but thoughtful, expression of the listening choices of the fans of old time radio. We asked listeners to choose not an individual episode from a series, but rather just one program --their all-time favorite radio show-- and then let us know.

It was an exciting month as listeners called our broadcast to "vote" or sent their choice by mail or e-mail.

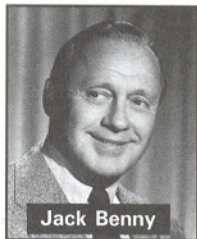
Many said that it was very difficult to single out just one show; they had so many old time radio favorites that they enjoyed. In fact, a number of listeners sent in their own list of twenty shows, their personal choices for the twenty best. But since we wanted only *one* choice from each respondent, we took their first choice and added it to our list.

And when the "voting" was over on June 1, we had actually received nominations for 73 different old time radio shows.

So we tabulated the "ballots" to find the top twenty vote-getters and come up with the *20 Best Old Time Radio Shows of the 20th Century* as determined by our *Those Were The Days* listeners. Here are the results:

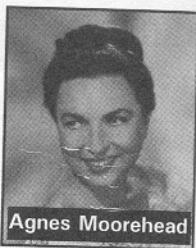
### 1. THE JACK BENNY PROGRAM

Always among the top-rated shows during radio's Golden Age, Jack Benny along with his super-talented cast of performers entertained listeners for 26 years (1932-1958 including network reruns). Noted for his sense of timing, Jack was most often the *victim* of the comedy. His character was so fully defined that audiences *knew* how he would react to a situation, then sat close to the radio, *waiting* for that reaction. Benny's cast always got the better of him and, in so doing, got most of the laughs. When Jack went to the vault, Ed, the guard got the comedy lines. When he took violin lessons, it was Professor LeBlanc who got all the laughs. When Jack was at home or in his Maxwell it was Rochester who not only was funnier, but *smarter*. At the railroad station, the doctor's office, the department store, Jack didn't have a chance. *Everyone* had great, funny lines. Masters of the "running gag," Jack and his writers worked hard each week to come up with an entertaining show. They always did.



## 2. SUSPENSE

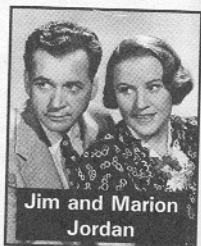
Radio's "outstanding theatre of thrills" brought quality drama with a suspenseful ending to listeners for 20 years (1942-1962). Using some of the medium's top writers, producers and directors, this series maintained an unusually high level of story telling. Producers recruited many of radio's most celebrated artists and mixed them generously with stars of stage and screen who, more often than not, were asked to perform in roles that were unusual for them. Many a screen or radio comedian would be cast in the role of a killer on *Suspense* while other actors and actresses, known for their lovable personalities, would be called on to perform as evil or deranged characters. Many *Suspense* programs became radio classics, including "Sorry, Wrong Number" by Lucille Fletcher, starring Agnes Moorehead (performed seven times). As radio was changing in the mid-to-late 1950s and early '60s, and as its' airtime evaporated, sometimes, to as little as 20 minutes, *Suspense* rose to the challenge, continuing to provide quality entertainment right to the end.



Agnes Moorehead

## 3. FIBBER MCGEE AND MOLLY

Jim and Marian Jordan along with writer Don Quinn, fashioned one of the most beloved radio shows of the era, bringing home-spun laughter to listeners for 24 years (1935-1959). The McGees started out in a broken down automobile, driving around the country, getting into one funny situation after another until one day they rolled into a little town called Wistful Vista. Fibber bought a raffle ticket on a house and won first prize: the nice little home at 79 Wistful Vista. That's where they stayed, greeting with guffaws and gags such local visitors as next door neighbor Gildersleeve, Mayor LaTrivia, Doc Gamble, Wallace Wimple, Mr. Old Timer, Teeney (the little girl who lived across the street) and, of course, announcer Harlow Wilcox who annoyed the Squire of Wistful Vista as he extolled the virtues of the sponsor's products. Fibber, who never had a job -- or finished any job he started-- thrived as a teller of tall tales, an opportunist, a schemer, but also a devoted husband who loved Molly dearly ("Ahh, there goes a good kid!"). This show was responsible for one of radio's most anticipated sound gags: the crash that resulted whenever someone opened their hall closet. "Gotta straighten out that closet one of these days."



Jim and Marion Jordan

## 4. THE SHADOW

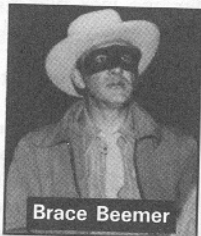
The show had one of the best-known openings on the air: "Who knows... what evil... lurks... in the hearts of men?... The Shadow knows! Heh, heh, heh, heh." From the pages of a Street and Smith pulp magazine to the radio in our living room, *The Shadow* thrilled young and old alike for 24 years (1930-1954). A character called "The Shadow" served as a narrator of a mystery drama for the first several years, then in 1937 he became Lamont Cranston, "wealthy young man about town," who had learned in the Orient the hypnotic power "to cloud men's minds" so that they could not see him as he tried, successfully each week, to apprehend an evildoer and prove that "crime does NOT pay." Over the years such stalwart radio actors as Orson Welles, Bill Johnstone and Bret Morrison were among those who provided the voice of *The Shadow*, whose "constant friend and companion" was "the lovely" Margo Lane, played variously by Agnes Moorehead, Marjorie Anderson, Grace Matthews and Gertrude Warner.



Bret Morrison

## 5. THE LONE RANGER

With his faithful Indian companion, the daring and resourceful masked rider of the plains led the fight for law and order on radio for 23 years (1933-1956 including network reruns). The show, a favorite of young listeners as well as adults, was the story of a Texas Ranger who, as the only survivor of an outlaw ambush that killed his brother and his other fellow Rangers, went on to avenge their deaths by becoming a champion of justice. With his friend Tonto, the Lone Ranger traveled throughout the early western United States, never killing an outlaw, just shooting the

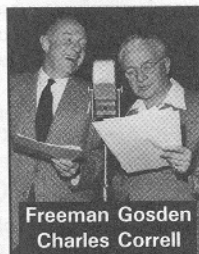


Brace Beemer

guns out of their hands or slightly wounding them with his silver bullets, forged at his secret hideout, an abandoned silver mine. The character was played in most of the early shows by Earle Graser, who died in an automobile accident in 1941. The role was taken over by Brace Beemer, who had been the announcer on the show, and who carried the part to its conclusion. Tonto was played throughout the run by John Todd, a theatrically-trained stage actor. The show's theme, Rossini's "William Tell Overture" became the most famous theme music on radio. "Hi-Yo Silver! Awaaaaaay!"

## 6. AMOS 'N' ANDY

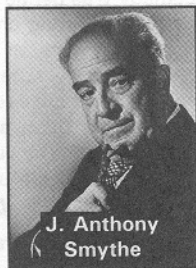
They were known as "radio's all-time favorites" during the 32 years (1928-1960) Freeman Gosden and Charles Correll appeared on the air as two white men using black dialects. In the earliest days, the program was listened to six nights a week by some forty million people who dropped everything to tune in. Movie theatres advertised that the picture would be stopped and a radio turned on so the theatre audience could listen in; a person walking down the street on a summer evening could hear the show coming from every house they passed; telephone usage dropped by nearly fifty per cent while the program was on the air. Amos and Andy were the co-owners of the "Fresh Air Taxi Company" (named because the car they bought had no windshield). Their at first daily then, later, weekly adventures captured the hearts and funny bones of Americans who loved not only the two leads, but also George Stevens, the "Kingfish" of the Mystic Knights of the Sea lodge, a character who became so popular that the show could have become known as "Kingfish and Andy." Holy mackerel! Ain't dat sumpin'!



Freeman Gosden  
Charles Correll

## 7. ONE MAN'S FAMILY

In 3,256 episodes writer Carlton E. Morse told the story of the Barbour family of the Sea Cliff section of San Francisco in a program "dedicated to the mothers and fathers of the younger generation and to their bewildering offspring." Audiences listened attentively for 27 years (1932-1959) as Henry and Fanny Barbour raised and participated in the lives of their five children, their spouses and numerous grandchildren. It was a sweeping saga that moved along in almost real time as the children -- Paul, Hazel, Claudia, Clifford, Jack-- grew up and the family grew older and larger. Listeners grew up and grew older, too, as they seemed to become a part of the Barbour family, sad that Paul failed to find true romantic happiness and frustrated that grandson Pinky had a hard time shaping up at college. J. Anthony Smythe portrayed Henry Barbour on the first broadcast and he was there for the final show. "Yes, yes."



J. Anthony  
Smythe

## 8. LUX RADIO THEATRE

The glamour and excitement of Hollywood was brought into living rooms from coast-to-coast each week for 21 years (1934-1955) by a soap company whose name not only adorned the title of the program, but dominated the intermission between-acts and the actors' curtain calls. For the first two years the series was broadcast in New York, but when the program moved to the West Coast in 1936 with movie producer Cecil B. DeMille as host, the series became an outstanding showcase for the elite of America's celluloid acting community. Year after year stars and supporting stars from virtually every Hollywood studio appeared in radio versions of current and not-so-current films, often in their original screen roles, frequently in parts they didn't have the chance to play on the screen. Its hour-long format provided sufficient time to produce respectable versions of most of the movies offered and the subject matter spanned every type of motion picture: comedy, drama, adventure, mystery, musical, western. When DeMille left in 1945, producers William Keighley and Irving Cummings stepped into the role. Lux presents Hollywood!



Cecil B. DeMille

## 9. VIC AND SADE

Writer Paul Rhymer created "radio's homefolks" in Chicago and for 14 years (1932-1946) the

small house halfway up in the next block in "Crooper, Illinois" became the place to visit each weekday. Residents of that house on Virginia Avenue were Victor R. Gook (played by Art Van Harvey), an accountant for the Consolidated Kitchenware Company; his wife Sade (Bernardine Flynn), a housewife who often shopped the wash rags sales at Yamelton's Department Store; and their adopted son Rush (Billy Idleson), who hung out with pals Smelly Clark, Blue Tooth Johnson and Rotten Davis. A frequent visitor to the household was Sade's Uncle Fletcher (Clarence Hartzell) who told stories about the Missouri Home for the Tall and liked to spend time at the Bright Kentucky Hotel. Except for a short time near the end of the series' run, Vic, Sade, Rush and Uncle Fletcher were the only characters heard on the air. Others were only spoken of: Chuck and Dottie Brainfeeble, Fred and Ruthie Stembottom, Hank Gutstop, J. K. Ruebush, and others who may have moved to another town, gotten married, became wealthy, and "later died."



**Bernardine Flynn  
Art Van Harvey**

## 10. GREAT GILDERSLEEVE

In what was probably the first incident of a supporting character on one program moving on to be the lead character on another, Throckmorton P. Gildersleeve left his neighbors, the Fibber McGees of Wistful Vista, and moved to Summerfield where he started a successful 16 year (1941-1957) residence as the town's water commissioner. Gildy became the legal guardian of his niece and nephew, Marjorie and Leroy Forrester. Gildersleeve tried his best to be a father to his young charges through the years. Life in Summerfield had its ups and downs for Gildy, but the comedy was gentle and the situations were real and warm as many wonderful supporting characters were woven in and out of the stories: Judge Hooker, Peavy the druggist, Floyd the barber, and Southern belle Leila Ransom. Harold Peary played Gildersleeve on the McGee series and for the first nine years of the spin-off. Willard Waterman, a Peary sound-alike took over in 1950 and stayed with the role until the end. Lillian Randolph was the efficient, likeable, always-in-control housekeeper, Birdie Lee Coggins. Marjorie was played, over the years, by Lurene Tuttle, Louise Erickson and Mary Lee Robb. Walter Tetley played 12-year-old Leroy throughout the run of the show. LeeeeRoy!



**Harold Peary**

## 11. I LOVE A MYSTERY

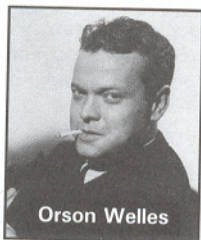
Adventurers Jack Packard, Doc Long and Reggie York lived a double --or repeatable-- life on radio during the eight years (1939-1944 and 1949-1952) this series was on the air. Created by Carlton E. Morse even as he was writing *One Man's Family*, the series of quarter-hour adventures had its original run as a California-based program starring Michael Raffetto, Barton Yarborough and Walter Patterson. The second run, using the original scripts from the first run, was recorded in New York and starred Russell Thorson, Jim Boles and Tony Randall. Joan Blondell was the West Coast utility actress in many roles while it was Mercedes McCambridge who filled that spot in the New York edition. Unlike many 15-minute adventure shows, which never seemed to come to the conclusion of a story, Morse wrote the adventures in three- or four-week sequences, thereby keeping the stories fresh and fast-moving and finding new ways for the trio of adventurers to fight "The Thing That Cries in the Night" or "The Richards Curse," to investigate the town of "Bury Your Dead, Arizona" or travel to the "Temple of the Vampires."



**Mercedes  
McCambridge**

## 12. MERCURY THEATRE ON THE AIR

More fans of radio remember the drama "The War of the Worlds" than the program on which the H. G. Wells story was dramatized. But it was Orson Welles who had the Martians invading New Jersey, the rest of the United States, and the rest of the world on the *Mercury Theater on the Air* (1938) and it was Welles who carried his Broadway theatrical company to even more quality broadcasts after a sponsor picked up the sustaining series and re-named it *Campbell Playhouse* (1938-1941). While his invasion from Mars brought fame and some fortune to Welles and his



**Orson Welles**

radio players, it was radio versions of such stories as "Dracula," "Treasure Island," "Sherlock Holmes" "The Count of Monte Cristo," "A Christmas Carol," and other well-known classics that made up Welles' radio credentials. But "The War of the Worlds," presented in the form of what we would call today a "breaking news story," captured the headlines and a place in radio history which most historians refer to as "the most famous radio broadcast of all time."

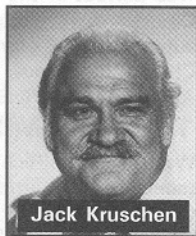
### 13. CHARLIE MCCARTHY SHOW

"What? A ventriloquist on the radio? It'll never last." Edgar Bergen heard that comment and many more, but he persisted and, after a few guest spots on Rudy Vallee's show, he began a radio career that did indeed last, for 18 years (1937-1955). Bergen and his little wooden friend with the top hat and monocle was perhaps the greatest comedy "team" on the air. Charlie was sometimes a child, playing hookey from school with Skinny Dugan, sometimes a grown-up, looking for a date with a glamorous actress or exchanging barbs with the likes of W. C. Fields or Fred Allen. Edgar Bergen's ability to be himself *and* Charlie at the same time was nothing less than amazing and, in the beginning, radio listeners would not believe that it was only one person providing the two voices. Even studio audiences claimed that Bergen was using a *midget*. Finally, listeners put aside their skepticism, sat back and laughed; as far as they were concerned, Charlie was a real person. Celebrity guests were anxious to appear with Bergen and McCarthy and stars like Mae West, Lana Turner, Marilyn Monroe, Gary Cooper, and Charles Laughton helped them stay near the top of the ratings. Mortimer Snerd and, for a while, Effie Klinker, helped with the comedy on the show, but it was the fun that Charlie provided that kept the folks laughing at home. If not, Charlie would threaten, "I'll mow ya' down, so help me, I'll mow ya' down!"



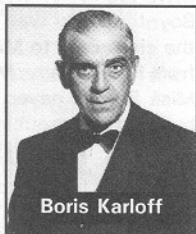
### 14. ESCAPE

Radio listeners who were tired of the everyday grind, who dreamed of a life of romantic adventure, who wanted to get away from it all, had for seven years (1947-1954) a program that provided those very elements. *Escape* made use of a stock company of radio's finest actors and actresses who, each week, freed the audience from "the four walls of today" and provided "a half-hour of high adventure." Performers like William Conrad and Paul Frees (who also served as narrators of the program), Hans Conried, Elliott Lewis, Berry Kroeger, Jack Kruschen, Virginia Gregg, Jeanette Nolan, and Lawrence Dobkin joined with writers E. Jack Neuman, John Meston, Les Crutchfield and David Ellis to present stories of mystery, adventure and the supernatural. The series was rarely sponsored and frequently moved from timeslot to timeslot and was difficult to keep track of, but the quality of the stories and the acting lifted it well above many of its contemporaries. Such *Escape* dramas as "Leiningen vs. the Ants," "The Most Dangerous Game," and "Three Skeleton Key" are considered radio classics.



### 15. LIGHTS OUT

Chilling and thrilling radio fans for 13 years (1934-47), this series brought what was originally promoted as "the ultimate in horror" to the airwaves. Wyllis Cooper, a Chicago radio writer created the program and, after a couple of years, when he left the Windy City for a career in Hollywood films, left the program in the capable hands of Arch Oboler. Oboler relished the opportunity and not only wrote and produced the weekly dramas, but hosted the show, telling in an almost matter-of-fact way of the thrills that lie ahead for the listener. He urged them to do as the program's title suggested and turn out the lights for a complete listening experience, while at the same time respectfully advising them to turn off the radio if they didn't think they could stand to hear the terror that was about to begin. Few listeners turned off the radio, most choosing to stay to hear actors like Boris Karloff, Mercedes McCambridge, Willard Waterman, and Mason Adams act out the evil and murderous stories developed by Oboler. Most famous of the *Lights Out* stories are "Cat Wife," about a woman who turns into a cat, and "The Dark," where a mysterious fog envelops bodies and turns them inside out.



## 16. THE CINNAMON BEAR

The most beloved children's story to emerge from the Golden Age of Radio, *The Cinnamon Bear* was given life by writer-creator Glanville Heisch in 1937. Fashioned as a recorded 26-episode "cliffhanger" serial, it was syndicated to radio stations across the country during the Christmas season. Twins Judy and Jimmy Barton are in their attic, searching for the silver star for the top of their Christmas tree when they meet a tiny, four-inch high teddy bear who comes to life and tells them the Crazy Quilt Dragon has taken the star. The twins "de-grow" and travel with Paddy O'Cinnamon to Maybe Land where they meet such characters as Snapper Snick the crocodile, Penelope the pelican, Mr. Presto the magician, Captain Tin Top, Weary Willie the stork, the Wintergreen Witch, Queen Melissa, and even Santa Claus. All these new Maybe Land friends either help or hinder in the search for the star, so it's touch and go as to whether or not Judy and Jimmy will be able to retrieve it in time for Christmas. Among the better known radio performers who appear in the series are Verna Felton, Frank Nelson, Hanley Stafford, Joseph Kearns, Elvia Allman, Howard McNear, Gale Gordon, and Lou Merrill. "Bless my stuffin'!"



Verna Felton

## 17. GUNSMOKE

The story of the "violence that moved west with young America" came to radio near the very end of the Golden Age, but *Gunsmoke* added originality, creativity and gave added life to the medium over a period of nine years (1952-1961). It was radio's first "adult western" offering fully developed characters and stories aided and abetted by a fine musical score and creative sound effects, called "sound patterns" that gave the listener credit for having an imagination. Veteran actor William Conrad was perfect in the role of United States Marshal Matt Dillon of Dodge City, Kansas... "the first man they look for, and the last they want to meet." The first-rate supporting cast of veteran radio performers added to the joy of listening: Parley Baer as deputy Chester Proudfoot; Georgia Ellis as saloon keeper Kitty Russell; and Howard McNear as Doc Adams. The scripts, too, were of the highest caliber, written mostly by John Meston.



William Conrad  
Georgia Ellis

## 18. OUR MISS BROOKS

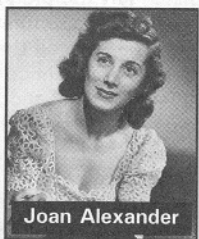
Walter Denton (Richard Crenna) and Harriet Conklin (Gloria McMillan) were teenagers who attended Madison High School on radio for nine years (1948-1957). They were taught by English teacher Connie Brooks and biology teacher Mr. Boynton (Jeff Chandler), with principal Osgood Conklin (Gale Gordon) looking over everyone's shoulders the whole time. The program centered on the activities of Miss Brooks, played by Eve Arden whose portrayal of a school teacher was filled with lighthearted warmth and good humor, providing great fun for listeners. She was usually short of money, often frustrated by the demands of her boss, and always thwarted in her attempts to have some sort of a social life through her personal attraction to Boynton, who was embarrassed at any hint of romance. The scene shifted each week from the classroom to Miss Brooks' apartment where she received some degree of aid and comfort from her landlady, Mrs. Davis (Jane Morgan). Frequently the victim of someone else's scheme, Miss Brooks never hesitated to come to the rescue when there was trouble, but she often bumped into trouble of her own.



Gale Gordon  
Eve Arden

## 19. X MINUS ONE

From the "far horizons of the unknown" came this short-lived, three year (1955-1958) series of outstanding science fiction dramas. Based mostly on stories from *Galaxy* magazine, the program brought an adult approach to the weekly tales of the future, an approach that had not been apparent on such juvenile sci fi adventures as *Flash Gordon*, *Buck Rogers*, or *Tom Corbett, Space Cadet*. Ernest Kinoy and George Lefferts wrote and adapted stories by authors Ray Bradbury, Isaac Asimov and others who gave radio's declining listeners a thrill ride into the future for "adventures in which you'll live in a million could-be years on a thousand may-be worlds." Added to the mix was a

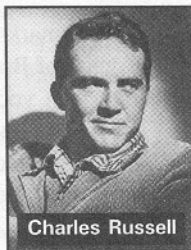


Joan Alexander

top notch cast of East Coast performers who had cut their teeth on radio and were still there to provide state-of-the-art performances: Mason Adams, Joan Alexander, Larry Haines, Bob Hastings, Mandel Kramer, Charlotte Manson, Lawson Zerbe, and a score of others. "Count-down for blast-off... X minus five... four... three... two... X minus one... Fire!"

## 20. YOURS TRULY, JOHNNY DOLLAR

"America's fabulous free-lance insurance investigator" was portrayed by no less than six different actors during its 13 year run (1949-1962). Charles Russell (1949-50) was the first to play the "man with the action-packed expense account," followed by Edmund O'Brien (1950-52), John Lund (1952-54), Bob Bailey (1955-60), Bob Readick (1960-61), and Mandel Kramer (1961-61). In an unusual twist in dramatic programming, the series, usually in a half-hour format, switched to a five-times-a-week, quarter-hour format for the 1955-56 season. Each story was complete in five chapters, giving the writers a chance to expand the stories and enrich character development. In either format, it was a private eye show with a difference. Dollar was hired by insurance companies who wanted him to check out claims they felt were fraudulent, but his investigations often lead him to murder or murderers as he traveled across the country. He kept careful track of all his expenses, itemizing them for his client as he went along, finally solving the case, totaling up his expenses and signing his report, "Yours truly, Johnny Dollar."



Charles Russell

So there you have it: the *20 Best Old Time Radio Shows of the 20th Century* as chosen by listeners to our *Those Were The Days* program. We want to thank everyone who participated in this effort.

It may be interesting to note that the listeners' number one choice, *The Jack Benny Program*, received 26 per cent of the total votes cast in this survey. In fact, the first five shows on our list received a total of 53 per cent of the total votes cast. Finally, of the 73 "nominated" shows, those that ended up in the top 20 received 79 per cent of all votes cast.

In addition to being honored by our listeners, many of the **20 Best** programs and their stars have already been inducted into the **Radio Hall of Fame**. *Amos 'n' Andy Show*, *Charlie McCarthy Show*, *Fibber McGee and Molly*, *Lone Ranger*, *Lux Radio Theatre*, *Mercury Theatre on the Air*, *One Man's Family*, and *The Shadow* have all been so-honored.

Individuals from our **20 Best** who have been inducted are Eve Arden, Jack Benny, Edgar Bergen, William Conrad, Charles Correll, Freeman Gosden, Jim and Marian Jordan, Fran Striker (writer of *The Lone Ranger*), and Orson Welles.

This year, in induction ceremonies to be broadcast nationally on November 20, the **Radio Hall of Fame** will induct Gale Gordon, who was heard regularly on four programs from our **20 Best** list: *Fibber McGee and Molly* (as Mayor LaTrivia), *Our Miss Brooks* as Mr. Conklin), *Great Gildersleeve* (as Mr. Bullard), and *Cinnamon Bear* (as Weary Willie, the stork). Also to be inducted this year is Kate Smith, who did not make our listeners' **20 Best** list, but who nevertheless made important contributions to radio and certainly deserves her place in the **Radio Hall of Fame**.

And, speaking of *The Cinnamon Bear*, the popular holiday series will return to our *Those Were The Days* program this year after a ten year absence. The 26-episode serial will begin on November 6th and continue until the last chapter is played on December 18. Check the listings for more details.

--Chuck Schaden