

“Say Goodnight, Gracie”

BY TERRY BAKER

The entertainment industry has produced a long list of “Dumb Doras.” That is, comediennes who have portrayed silly characters. Their history dates back to the days of vaudeville where many a bill would include one of these women. Some performers achieved a marginal degree of success but most faded from sight. Few were able to parlay their talents into stardom. The first of these was Grace Ethel Cecile Rosalie Allen.

Gracie Allen was born in San Francisco on July 26, 1905. Hers was a good-size Irish Catholic family that included her brother George, and three sisters, Bessie, Pearl, and Hazel. Her father, George Allen, was a popular dancer who performed all along the west coast. Gracie’s mother, while not an entertainer herself, did all she could to encourage her children’s ambitions. With her father’s background and her mother’s support there was never a doubt in Gracie’s mind that she would wind up in show business.

Her first stage performance was at the age of three when she danced with her father and sisters at a church social. Gracie was pleased with her first effort and decided to join her sisters in taking lessons. All four daughters became quite accomplished dancers. Gracie did not enjoy dancing as much as her sisters but did believe it would help her break into the business.

Gracie’s first paying job came as a singer in her early teens. During school vacation Gracie would sing songs in between shows at local movie houses. After graduating from convent school, Gracie was able to use this experience as she teamed up professionally with her



GRACE ETHEL CECILE ROSALIE ALLEN

sisters in a short lived song and dance act called The Four Colleens.

Upon the demise of The Four Colleens, Gracie chose to set off on her own. She was hired by Larry Reilly to appear in his vaudeville routine. Reilly staged a dramatic act and Gracie was one of the heroines. It was her first acting role but she performed well and the act was successful enough to get bookings all along the Pacific coast.

It wasn't long before Reilly decided to make changes in the act. He hired two of Gracie's sisters, Bessie and Hazel, and took the act on the road under the title "Larry Reilly and Company." They played to good reviews throughout the midwest but by the time they reached the east coast, Gracie's sisters had returned to San Francisco. Bessie returned to get married and Hazel wanted to help Pearl

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with a dance school they had started.

With two performers gone, Reilly renamed the act again calling it "Larry Reilly." Gracie could live with being billed as "and Company" but she would not accept no billing at all. When the act reached New Jersey, she quit.

The year was 1922 and Gracie found herself in New York City with no family, no friends, and no job. For six months she searched for a new partner but found none. Her sisters sent her money to live on but if Gracie planned to stay there until finding a partner, she would have to find a steady job in the meantime.

Since she had no job skills, Gracie enrolled in a stenography school hoping to find employment as a secretary. While studying for her new career, Gracie took up residence in a New Jersey rooming house. Her two roommates, Mary Kelly and Rena Arnold, also had show business aspirations. Mary became her closest friend but it was Rena who would introduce Gracie to her lifelong partner, both on stage and in life.

Rena Arnold was working in a comedy act at a small theater in Union City, New Jersey. Appearing at the same theater was the team of George Burns and Billie Lorraine, a variety act that consisted of impersonations of top vaudeville stars. It was a good routine but after working together for close to a year, the two men had agreed to part company. Rena had heard that both men would be looking for new partners and she convinced Gracie to come watch the boys perform and see if she wanted to work with either one.

Gracie liked their act and after meeting both men, chose to work with George. They agreed to perform a comedy act that he had written and bill themselves as Burns & Allen. George got top billing because he wrote the act and was essentially the star of it. He got all the laughs and it was Gracie's job to set them up for him.

They rehearsed for three weeks prior to



GRACIE ALLEN'S WRITERS—These four men devoted their lives to keeping Gracie a "dumbbell" arrive at the office nice and fresh. Standing, from left, are Bill Burns, George Burns and John Medbury. At the typewriter is Harvel Helm. They seem to have an idea.

their first booking, refining the act as they went along. Gracie didn't rehearse well but George would soon come to realize that she never rehearsed well. It was onstage, in front of an audience, that Gracie's talents came to light. George found this out on opening night.

Their first appearance was at the Hill Street Theater in Newark, New Jersey. Both were nervous when they walked onstage but with the first line of dialogue, George knew this was a different Gracie. She spoke with a confidence and sincerity that was not apparent in rehearsals. And the audience loved her.

While the audience was enthralled with Gracie, the act itself did not go too well. George was supposed to be the comic but Gracie was getting all the laughs with her straight lines. George liked being the star but he also wanted the act to be successful and that meant making some changes.

Before the second show that evening, George altered the routine so that Gracie got a large portion of the punch lines. The second performance went much better and as they played other theaters, George gave practically all of the funny lines to Gracie. He gauged audience reaction to Gracie and added the types of jokes they liked to hear her tell. Eventually George created lines he liked to call illogical logic. These were lines that made no sense to anyone else but perfect sense to Gracie. These became the cornerstone of their routine and served them well for the next 35 years.

It didn't take long for word of Gracie's talent to spread. In only a matter of months the team of Burns & Allen became one of the hottest properties in vaudeville. Wherever they went critics raved about

Gracie's comedic talents. Most of them ignored George completely but it didn't matter. George knew he had something special with Gracie and wasn't about to louse it up. Besides, he was falling in love with her.

George had no designs of romance when they first teamed up. Over time his feelings for her grew. Gracie was easy enough to fall in love with. She was pretty, smart, considerate, and extremely talented. Trouble was, she had been seeing another gentleman on a regular basis.

Gracie had met Benny Ryan during her stenography school days. Ryan was a popular actor and songwriter and the two liked each other very much. On occasion, Gracie would confide to George how much she cared for Ryan. George knew he had



GRACIE'S WRITERS—Well, the idea didn't work. So the boys sit down to think.



GRACIE'S WRITERS—Gracie steals a pencil and starts making up as the boys start to really labor.

to do something if he was to have any chance romantically with her. He confessed his feelings for her but she didn't take him seriously.

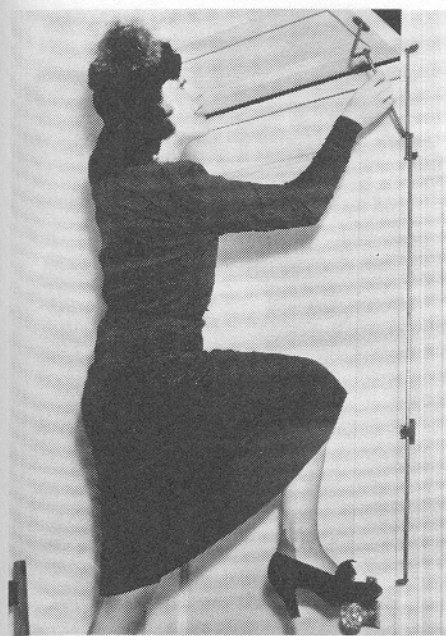
Gracie was all set to marry Ryan in the fall of 1925 but George got a reprieve when they were offered a four-month booking with the Orpheum circuit at \$500 a week. That kind of money was too good to pass up so Gracie agreed to postpone her wedding until they returned.

All through their trip George attempted to convince Gracie that his feelings were genuine. He even proposed but she turned him down. Upon returning to New York in December, George decided to ask her one more time. By now Gracie had realized that George was sincere and she was starting to feel the same about him. After much soul searching, Gracie accepted George's next proposal and they were married the following month.

With their personal relationship now settled, they were able to focus more attention on their careers. Just six weeks after their wedding, the Keith Orpheum circuit signed them to a five year contract that paid them on average \$500 a week. Burns & Allen was now a name act and only played the top vaudeville houses. In 1928 they even played a five month booking in England and were just as well received as they had been in the states.

Upon returning home, George and Gracie got the chance to try out their talents in a new medium. Fred Allen had been hired by Paramount Pictures to star in a nine minute short but he had to back out at the last minute. Jack Benny was asked to replace Fred but he instead suggested that his friends George and Gracie be given the job.

The resulting short was simply a brief segment of their vaudeville routine



GRACIE TRIES TO LEAVE—"They're nuts. I'm getting out of here!"

performed in front of a camera. They were paid \$1,800 for their efforts and Paramount liked them so much that they were hired to do four more at a salary of \$14,000. Over the years they appeared in 14 shorts and 14 feature films. Gracie even appeared in two on her own, "The Gracie Allen Murder Case" and Mr. & Mrs. North."

It's unfortunate that, as their popularity in vaudeville was at its peak, vaudeville was dying. Radio was slowly killing it and all the top stars were making the switch to this new method of entertainment. George had no doubts that he and Gracie would be able to make the switch. In 1929 while back in England, they had been called on to promote their tour by appearing on several British radio stations. These broadcasts went well and as long as the act had Gracie there was no reason to believe that Burns & Allen would not succeed on American radio as well.

Surprisingly, some did have doubts. One advertising executive told George that their act would never fly on radio because



GRACIE'S WRITERS—But they catch her and try to explain the joke. Gracie doesn't get it.

Gracie's voice was too high. Luckily they got the chance to prove him wrong.

In the fall of 1931, George and Gracie were appearing at the Palace in New York with Eddie Cantor. Eddie already had his own successful radio show and thought it would be a great idea to have Gracie on as a guest. George also liked the idea, provided that Gracie agreed to it and that they used material that he wrote.

Gracie however wanted no part of it. She did not like working without George nor was she excited about moving into a new medium. For all of Gracie's talents, she was never very confident of her abilities. It would be up to George to convince her that the move was necessary for their careers and that she would do just fine. Gracie did the show and it was like she and Eddie had worked together for years.

The show went so well that right after the broadcast, NBC offered Burns & Allen \$750 to appear as guests on Rudy Vallee's "Fleischmann's Yeast Hour." This led to their first regular radio job on The Guy Lombardo Show on CBS. Robert Burns

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Cigars hired them to provide eight minutes of comedy during the program. The unique part about this job was that Guy Lombardo's orchestra never stopped playing. George and Gracie were in another studio and performed their routines over the music. This continued for almost a year and when Guy Lombardo decided to switch networks, George and Gracie were hired to take over the program themselves. They remained on radio for the next 17 years.

Radio gave them the opportunity to perform for a lot of people who had never gotten the chance to see them onstage. They had heard of Gracie's antics but now were able to listen to her in the comfort of their own house. With Gracie leading the way, the show became a hit. Everyone could identify with her. Listeners either understood her crazy logic or knew someone who did.

Initially their show was done without a studio audience. This suited Gracie just fine as she did not like looking out at audiences knowing they were staring back at her. In vaudeville they solved this problem by aiming spotlights at her eyes so she couldn't see anything. When a studio audience was added to their radio broadcasts, Gracie simply turned herself at an angle towards George so she couldn't see the crowd.

Gracie wanted nothing to do with the inner workings of the show. Just as she trusted George to handle all their financial matters, Gracie also trusted him and the writers to create a quality script each week. It was a rare occurrence when Gracie would refuse to read a line but if she made up her mind that a joke was not funny, not even George could talk her out of it.

During the show's first seven years, Gracie played a part in two of the most famous stunts in radio history. The first was the "lost brother" episode. In January of their first season, CBS planned to move



GRACIE'S WRITERS—"Now, boys," says Gracie, "it's easy to write jokes. All you do is punch the typewriter keys."

the show into a new time slot and needed an inexpensive way to promote this fact. Gracie was always talking about her mythical brother on their program and it was the network's plan to have her pop up on other shows looking for her "missing" brother.

It started with a visit to Eddie Cantor's program. A half hour later she showed up on Jack Benny's show. During the next two weeks, Gracie appeared on a host of other CBS shows, each time searching for her brother. The publicity they received was beyond anything they could have dreamed of. The network received over 250,000 letters, even some claiming to have kidnapped Gracie's brother. Eventually the press tracked down Gracie's real brother, an accountant in San Francisco. He was not thrilled about his sudden celebrity status and fired off a letter to Gracie asking her to please find another way to make a living.

There was also Gracie's run for the presidency on the Surprise Party ticket in 1940. Her slogan was "Down with



GRACIE'S WRITERS — With Gracie properly cared for, the boys get busy and finish the script.

common sense, Vote for Gracie." With the assistance of the Union Pacific Railroad, Gracie began a whistle stop campaign that took her to 34 cities between L.A. and Omaha, Nebraska. Even though it was all a joke, over 200,000 people came out to meet the train along the way. Gracie obliged them by giving a good old-fashioned speech at each stop. On election day Gracie received several thousand write-in votes but could not overtake FDR.

With the increased exposure that radio provided, Gracie's popularity soared. She found herself in great demand as a guest on other programs and in areas outside of radio as well. With the aid of the show's writers, Gracie penned an advice column and wrote a book. She also endorsed a number of products ranging from bath salts to wedding gowns. George thought this was very amusing because if audiences believed Gracie to be so dumb, why would they buy anything she recommended? Gracie took it all in stride, never believing she was as big a star as everyone said she was.

In the late 1930's with their radio career running smoothly, George and Gracie decided to start a family. Unable to have children, they adopted a boy and a girl, moved into a beautiful home in Beverly Hills and tried their best to raise the children in a normal family environment. Gracie spent as much time as possible with the children, playing games, teaching them proper manners and the like. George was a pushover when it came to the kids so Gracie had to provide most of the discipline. With two loving parents, the children grew up to be well-adjusted adults, neither one having any desire to go into show business.

The radio show sailed through the 30's but by the early 1940's, their audience began to drop steadily. Listeners tastes were changing and the vaudeville routines that had been their staple were not as popular as they once were. In order to win the audience back, changes were made.

The program became more of a situation comedy with each episode focusing on George and Gracie's exploits as man and wife. In order to take some of the load off Gracie, more attention was given to their strong supporting cast which included announcer Harry Von Zell, bandleader Meredith Willson, Bea Benaderet, Elvia Allman and Mel Blanc. Gracie was still playing her same mixed-up character but the change in format brought new life to the program and put it back at the top of the ratings until they left radio in 1950.

George was anxious to move into television but it was another case of having to convince Gracie to try something she was unsure of. She finally agreed to make a series pilot so George brought together much of the cast and crew from their radio show to assist them. The show would revolve around a married show business couple with George narrating the story as well as providing commentary on the proceedings. Gracie's contribution was to just be Gracie.

The pilot was successful and the television show ran for eight seasons but not

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without taking its toll on Gracie. Television was a full time job and required her presence on the set five days a week. Since her dialogue usually made no sense, Gracie couldn't play off other actors lines so she would have to memorize the entire script. All this work grew tiring and she began looking forward to the day when she could call it quits.

When Gracie announced her retirement in 1958, no one took her seriously. They all felt she would jump right back into performing after a good rest. Gracie knew differently. Her career was over and she just wanted to take it easy and spend time with her children and grandchildren.

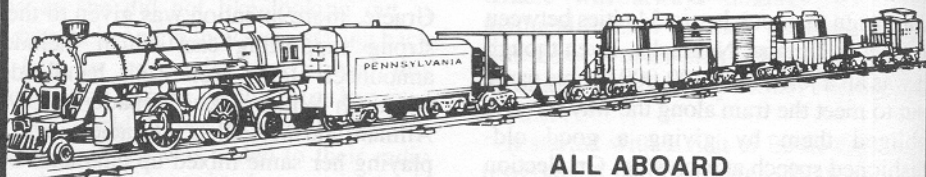
George never tried talking her out of it but Gracie sensed that he wasn't ready to retire. Gracie encouraged George to go out on his own and was quite pleased when he

decided to try his hand at a night club act. Though it never bothered George, Gracie was always upset that he didn't get the credit he deserved for their success. She knew how important he was to the act and how respected George's talents were throughout the entertainment industry. Unfortunately, audiences only knew George as the guy who stood next to Gracie. When George became successful without her, no one was more happy than Gracie. George is now 93, still performing with no plans to retire.

Gracie's last few years were spent out of the limelight, the way she wanted it. A heart condition began slowing her down in the early 60's and she died of a heart attack in 1964 at the age of 59. A loving wife, mother, and gifted performer, Gracie was anything but dumb. It was because of her special talents that she was able to convince audiences otherwise and entertain us so well for 35 years.

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