

35 Years of *Those Were The Days*

BY GARDNER KISSACK

What was life like in 1970?

For starters, *Life* was still a weekly magazine and people still compared it to *Look* and the *Saturday Evening Post*. *Time*'s Man of the Year was West Germany's Willy Brandt, and the Berlin Wall was but nine years old.

The Baltimore Orioles beat the Cincinnati Reds 4-1 in the World Series and the Kansas City Chiefs defeated the Vikings 23-7 to win Super Bowl IV.

Patton was a box office smash and John Wayne received his only Oscar for his role in *True Grit*.

Popular songs included "Bridge Over Troubled Water" and "Everything is Beautiful."

President Nixon and Henry Kissinger were trying to end the war in Vietnam. Prices were edging up; inflation was a growing problem; the oil crisis was bubbling.

Gardner Kissack of Chicago Heights, Illinois is a retired school teacher and a member of the Those Were The Days support staff.

The threat of polyester pants, pants-suits, and jackets was looming (so to speak), but we learned that they were too hot – or too

cold – because they didn't "breathe" or absorb like cotton or wool, they unraveled and they fuzzed-up.

A week's worth of television brought viewers *The FBI*, *Bonanza* and Ed Sullivan on Sunday; *Gunsmoke* and *Laugh-In* on Monday; *Marcus Welby, M.D.*, *Mod Squad*, *Beverly Hillbillies* and *Green Acres* on Tuesday; *Hawaii 5-0* on Wednesday; *The Odd Couple*, *Flip Wilson*, and *Ironside* on Thursday; *The Brady Bunch* and *That Girl* on Friday and *Let's Make A Deal*, *Mannix*, Lawrence Welk, and *The Mary Tyler Moore Show* on Saturday.

Radio in 1970 was an amalgam of music, news, sports and talk, most of it on AM radio. FM was in only a few homes and fewer automobiles. Radio's Golden Age of comedy, drama and variety had expired at least a decade earlier. "Prime time" radio had moved from the evening hours of



Chuck Schaden

the preceding 40-some years to “morning drive” time, which was filled with disc jockeys spinning the latest version of rock and pop hits.

But in the spring of 1970, someone came along to do something for those who longed for simpler times and the glories of radio’s earlier era.

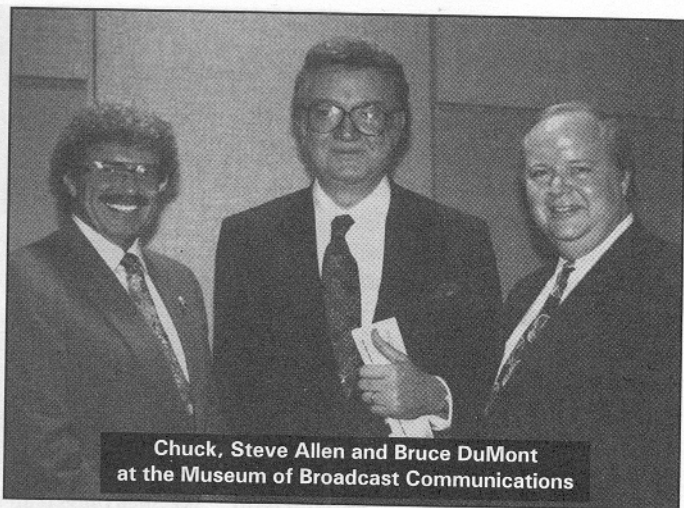
At 1:05 p.m. Saturday, May 2, at WNMP, a small daytime AM radio station in Evanston, Illinois, the first *Those Were The Days* program created, planned, promoted and hosted by Chicago journalist Chuck Schaden went on the air.

Radio’s second Golden Age began with Schaden “bridging the sound gap between yesterday and today...” His first program featured 1940s re-broadcasts of *Ma Perkins*, *The Thin Man* and the *Pepsodent Show*, along with Billy Jones and Ernie Hare as the *Tasty Breadwinners* from 1934.

Fast-forward 35 years to 2005, through thousands of hours of the best from the Golden Age of Radio and only three different stations (WNMP, which became WLTD; WNIB and WDCB) and the same Saturday afternoon time slot. *Those Were the Days* has been on the air for three-and-a-half decades, longer than the original Golden Age of Radio, considered by many historians to be 1930-55.

“I hardly ever met a radio show I didn’t like,” says Chuck Schaden, whose observation seems to agree with his thousands of loyal listeners. “Oh, I’ve had some I liked less than others, but they too deserve to be played.”

His collection of old radio shows began some 40 years ago when he jumped at the



Chuck, Steve Allen and Bruce DuMont
at the Museum of Broadcast Communications

opportunity to purchase some reel-to-reel tapes of “vintage” broadcasts from a collector on the East Coast. Among his earliest acquisitions were Orson Welles’ “The War of the Worlds” and copies of *Fibber McGee and Molly*, *The Jack Benny Program* and *Suspense*.

Schaden began collecting with a passion. “Some might call it an obsession and that would be accurate, I guess. I couldn’t believe that I could find these wonderful shows after having missed them so much since they went off the air a decade or so earlier. I decided I wanted to have as many of them as possible.”

He found others with a similar passion. Each acquired programs from different sources and they began trading copies of their tapes. Soon the few reels of tape became many. “I may have had a thousand broadcasts by the late 1960s and some weeks I might have received a hundred reels of tape in the mail,” explains Chuck.

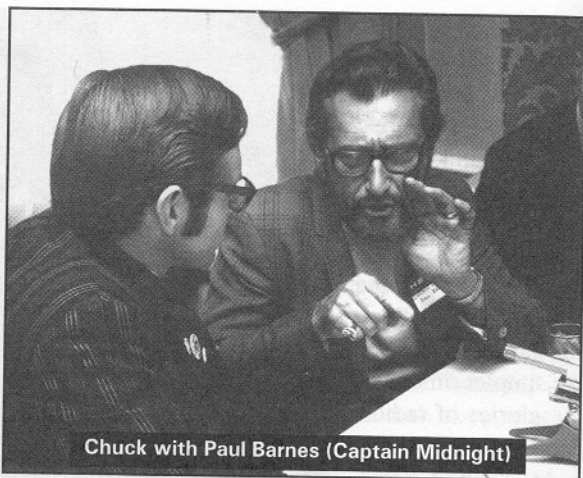
The collection kept growing and his thousands of shows were all documented, at first on neatly typed loose-leaf pages, then on index cards and finally on a computer data base. When the Museum of Broadcast Communications (MBC) opened in Chicago in 1987 (Schaden was

a founding member of the board), his collection became the Museum's core radio collection. "Chuck's donation of his 50,000 hours of radio programming was, without question, the most significant early contribution made to the Museum," recalls MBC founder/president Bruce DuMont.

One of the most satisfying results of his collection and broadcasts, Chuck believes, is that the shows have been embraced by people who either missed them the first time, or were too young to remember them, or who were not even born yet. Being able to share the Golden Age of Radio with so many others is one more part of an amazing legacy.

Not content with simply playing the old-time programs on the air each week, Schaden sought opportunities to speak with the people who worked in front of the microphones and behind the scenes during the great radio days.

Interviewing the stars of Radio's Golden



Chuck with Paul Barnes (Captain Midnight)

Age has played an important role on *Those Were The Days*, providing fans with many hours of enjoyment, insight and personal glimpses by those "voices" so well-known from radio.

During the first season of *TWTD*, indeed a mere six weeks into the show, Schaden was at Sages' East restaurant on North Michigan Avenue on June 16, 1970 where a collection of radio personalities had gathered to celebrate their participation in the "good old days of Chicago radio." At that

Thanks to the Behind the Scenes Staff

At the end of most of his broadcasts, Chuck usually takes a moment to thank those who have helped "behind the scenes."

These are dedicated friends who are very important to the programs; most of them are or have become fans of the golden age of radio.

They have served from time-to-time as engineers, technicians, production assistants, and volunteers.

Without their help, *TWTD* broadcasts could not have stayed on the air for these 35 years.

They are:

Bob Abella	Mary Ellen Little Cooper	Todd Neumann	Mike Stosich
Jon Adams	Rick Garofalo	Mort Paradise	Mark Vail
Carl Amari	Kathy Garofalo	Karl Pearson	Alex Wayne
Terry Baker	John Holzer	Larry Peters	Ted Weber
Neil Baskin	Gardner Kissack	Patty Schaden Randstrom	Jeff Weigel
Mary Bolton	Len Kunka	Susan Schaden Sturm	Larry Youngberg
Dennis Bubacz	George Littlefield	Gary Schroeder	Jim Zarembski
Scott Castillo	Todd Nebel	Koni Shaughnessy	and
Michael Cervone	Mark Nelson	Matt Sonnenberg	Ken Alexander

Celebrating Radio's Golden Age



event, armed with a microphone and portable tape recorder, Schaden talked with, among others, Little Orphan Annie, Captain Midnight, Billy and Betty from the *Jack Armstrong* program, and the director of *Ma Perkins* – Shirley Bell Cole, Paul Barnes, John Gannon, Sarajane Wells and Phil Bowman, respectively. He was off and running!

A few weeks later, in September, Chuck sat across from Jack Benny, who was in the Chicago area appearing at the Mill Run Theatre in suburban Niles, and they talked about Mr. Benny's radio days. "Can you imagine – I met Jack Benny!" Chuck exclaims.

Before the second anniversary of *Those Were The Days* he had taped interviews with Hans Conried, Mel Blanc, Agnes Moorehead, Hal Peary, Don Ameche, Ralph Edwards, and Rudy Vallee.

Schaden's interviews, which he prefers to call "conversations" and which come across as two friends chatting, numbered at least 170 by 1989 and now total more than 200. Not only is he well-prepared for each guest (many have commented that he knows about their achievements better than they), but his enthusiasm for and knowledge of the material relaxes the subjects and have led to some amazingly insightful and personal revelations.

His interviews – conversations – gathered over all the years he has been on the air, form the basis for his book *Speaking of Radio*, published in 2003.

Chuck Schaden has been a creative and imaginative coordinator of special programming during the past 35 years of *Those Were the Days*. Each year he has offered special seasonal and topical shows.

He begins the end-of-year holiday season with his annual

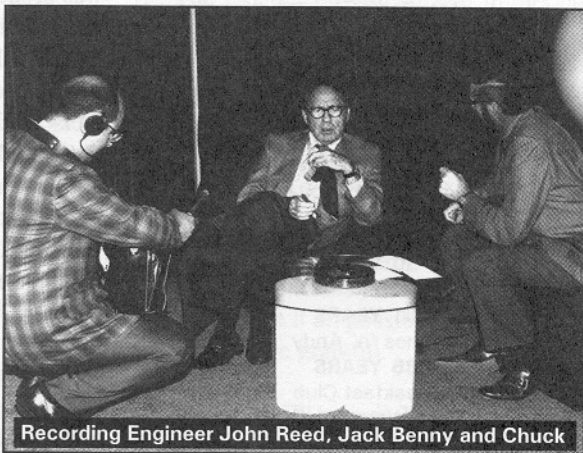
Hallowe'en broadcast on the last Saturday of October. This usually features a combination of scary and mysterious dramas combined with spooky comedy shows which he sends out to listeners via his "ghost-to-ghost network." This is followed a few weeks later by his annual November broadcast of appropriate Thanksgiving episodes.

The Christmas season is filled with vintage holiday broadcasts offering "Radio to Get Into the Holiday Spirit By.... to Plan Your Christmas List By... to Address Christmas Cards By... to Wrap, Bake and Decorate By." Listeners call to report that they are keeping pace with his "schedule" or to tell him that they are "way behind, so slow down!"

Valentine's Day, St. Patrick's Day, Easter, Memorial Day, Independence Day, Labor Day and Columbus Day have all received special *TWTD* treatment.

Schaden has featured scores of broadcasts devoted to the talents of specific radio or motion picture stars, and those programs almost always contained one of his interviews with the subject or an expert guest who talks about the star of the day.

He has devoted multi-week salutes to such personalities as Bob Hope, Frank Sinatra, Al Jolson, Bing Crosby and Humphrey Bogart, but there's only one per-



Recording Engineer John Reed, Jack Benny and Chuck



HERE ARE SOME LONG-RUNNING OLD TIME RADIO PROGRAMS

5 YEARS

Life of Riley
Life with Luigi

6 YEARS

Abbott and Costello

8 YEARS

Jimmy Durante
Phil Harris and Alice Faye

10 YEARS

Ozzie and Harriet

11 YEARS

Inner Sanctum
Red Skelton

13 YEARS

Mr. District Attorney

16 YEARS

Fred Allen
Eddie Cantor
Dr. Christian
Rudy Vallee

18 YEARS

Bergen and McCarthy
Burns and Allen
Cavalcade of America
First Nighter
Great Gildersleeve

19 YEARS

Bob Hope

20 YEARS

Suspense

21 YEARS

Lux Radio Theatre

22 YEARS

Fibber McGee and Molly

23 YEARS

Gangbusters

Jack Benny

25 YEARS

Bing Crosby

27 YEARS

One Man's Family

30 YEARS

Voice of Firestone

31 YEARS

Amos 'n' Andy

35 YEARS

Breakfast Club
Those Were The Days

former who has been given the superstar treatment: Jack Benny. For 26 years Benny has been the subject of "Jack Benny Month" on *TWTD*. "Listeners start reminding me in late summer that they can't wait for the next Jack Benny Month," says Chuck, who tells them with a smile, "I can't wait either!"

On November 7, 1993 he was inducted into the Radio Hall of Fame, joining Jack Benny, Fibber McGee and Molly, Norman Corwin and the scores of radio stars who have been honored for their work on the air. "I am very proud of that. And I'm the only *fan* in the Hall of Fame," he says.

Schaden's commemoration of World War II stands out as one of the most ambitious, interesting and historical special events ever presented on *Those Were The Days*. Beginning on Saturday, December 7, 1991, to commemorate the 50th Anniversary of the attack on Pearl Harbor, he set out on an interesting journey. "I decided we should follow the progress of the war as it was reported on radio and as the war effort insinuated itself into radio programming."

His four-year odyssey became an aural history of World War II, 50 years after the earth-shaking agony of the conflict. Programming was chronological: war news was broadcast as it unfolded in the 1940s, complete with up-to-the-minute emergency bulletins, speeches, news reports, on-the-air eyewitness accounts of battles or attacks, with network correspondents giving first-hand descriptions of what they saw and experienced in Europe, in north Africa or in the Pacific. President Roosevelt's Fireside Chats were an important part of the undertaking, which included news coverage of D-Day, the Battle of the Bulge, the death of F.D.R., the end of the war in Europe, the dropping of the atomic bomb, and the surrender of Japan.

In an age when there was no television



Chuck Schaden, Wally Phillips, Rush Limbaugh, Robert Siegel and Linda Wertheimer (of 'All Things Considered'). Writer-producer Norman Corwin, unable to attend the ceremony, was also inducted.

coverage of the war, it was radio that provided the most personal, important and latest news of world events. Newspapers had, in many cases, more detailed coverage, but it took time to print and distribute the newspapers. Motion picture newsreels offered coverage of certain events of the war, but they often took several days to get to movie houses across the U.S. So it was left to radio to inform the public daily and immediately. Radio was a most trusted and reliable news source, and it captured the events of the war in a way not experienced before or since.

World War II was *radio's* war and radio was ready for it, not only with the news reports and speeches, but also with special programs and all types of entertainment shows that had something to say about the war, if only to remind listeners to "buy War Bonds" or "save used fats" or to observe rationing of food, rubber and other goods necessary to win the war. Jack Benny donated his Maxwell to the scrap drive and Fibber McGee was certain that his neighbor was a Nazi spy. Bob Hope entertained at military bases

and Eddie Cantor broadcast from the Hollywood Canteen for servicemen.

Schaden's four-year, 50th anniversary commemoration was so well-received that for the war's 60th anniversary, beginning in 2001, he added pre-Pearl Harbor coverage of the war in Europe and some other newly-acquired 1940s programs to the mix. "We'll continue until the war ends again, on the anniversary of V-J Day in

2005," he says.

How has *Those Were The Days* been able to survive all these years?

"The old shows were good," Chuck says simply. "If they weren't any good back in those radio days, they wouldn't be any good now. But they have staying-power. They were well-written and well-performed. They are not 'dated' by costumes or scenery or automobiles, all of which tend to 'date' movies or TV shows.

"The listener provides those things by using his imagination. The listener costumes the actors and decorates the set. He is a participant, not a spectator" and, Schaden adds, "the listener has been primarily responsible for our being here for 35 years. The stations, yes, of course. Our various sponsors and underwriters, for sure. But the listener, who has been with us while we take our weekly trip to radio's past has made it all possible, absolutely. I will always be grateful." ■

TUNE IN TWTD April 30 to hear Chuck Schaden's 35th Anniversary Broadcast.