

"'Tis Funny, McGee!"

An Appreciation of Fibber and Molly

BY ELIZABETH MC LEOD

Team a failed husband-and-wife small-time midwestern vaudeville act with an out-of-work cartoonist, and what do you

get?

One of radio's best-remembered, most enduring programs.

Fibber McGee and Molly is still widely heard in reruns today — more than seventy years after Jim and Marian Jordan



began their radio careers. For many listeners this often-corny, often-hokey, and always-amusing series remains the embodiment of old-time-radio fun. And, like most successful radio programs, the factors which made the series work were drawn from the personalities of its creators. Jim and Marian Jordan were, in real life, very much like the characters they played — unpretentious midwestern folks who had achieved success thru a combination of luck and hard work.

Both Jim and Marian were natives of Peoria, Illinois — which, despite its comedy image, was no rural backwater. During the 1890s, Peoria was the second-largest city in Illinois — a bustling industrial

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Jim and Marian Jordan
Fibber McGee and Molly

PHOTOFEST

community of fifty thousand people. It was also a major stop on the vaudeville circuits of the turn-of-the-century era — the phrase "Will it play in Peoria" paid tribute, in fact, to the demanding nature of its family-time audiences. Jim Jordan and Marian Driscoll were among the many stage-struck youngsters who made their way each week to one of the several Peoria vaudeville houses to see what was new (and perhaps during these trips they might have encountered another Peoria youth with dreams of a show business career, a brickmason's son by the name of Charlie Correll).

Jim Jordan had been raised on a farm outside the city, but never missed a chance

to come into town for a show. He was a budding talent himself, with a clear tenor voice that he displayed as a member of the St. John's Church Choir. A fellow singer in this choir was Marian Driscoll, three years' Jim's junior — they met, courted, and in 1918, were married.

Singers were a dime a dozen during these years — every town, every city had its legion of youthful vocalists hoping for a shot at the big time, and Jim Jordan was just another voice in the crowd. While Marian contributed to the family income by giving piano lessons, Jim plodded along with a series of hum-drum jobs, taking stage engagements on the side wherever he could find them, hoping for his one big break. For the Jordans, singly, and as a team, that break never came — at least not so far as vaudeville was concerned.

But vaudeville was no longer the only game in town. By the mid-1920s, radio had become big business — and Chicago one of its most bustling centers of activity. A brief audition performance in 1924 landed the Jordans a contract as a harmony team over station WIBO under the sponsorship of the Williamson Candy Company. As the O'Henry Twins, Marian and Jim performed as a harmony team — and by the following year were supplementing their songs with bits of humorous patter.

Song-and-patter duos were nothing unusual, but what the Jordans lacked in originality they made up for in determination. Between 1925 and 1929 they appeared in several series over several stations in a wide



variety of formats — honing their microphone talents and experimenting with different voice characterizations. Their 1929 serial *The Smith Family* over WENR developed a strong local following, and they continued to perform as a comic-harmony duo on various other shows. It was during this period that Jim created an old-man character called "Uncle Luke," and Marian began to play around with a little-girl voice which was soon given the name of "Teeny."

It was at WENR that the Jordans made the most important connection of their careers — hooking up with a struggling young writer by the name of Don Quinn. Quinn's gently-absurd sense of humor meshed perfectly with the Jordans' own performing style — and the result was *Smackout*.

Beginning over WMAQ in 1931, *Smackout* was a daily fifteen minute show which combined all of the ingredients which the Jordans had found most successful in their radio careers: light musical harmonies, amusing voice characterizations, and a loosely-connected serial storyline. Jim Jordan was featured as Uncle Luke Gray, the proprietor of a small coun-

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try store, and also as Luke's nephew Jim — married to niece Marian, who also appeared as Teeny, the little girl from across the street. Uncle Luke was a vague, meandering sort of gentleman, who was always "smack out" of whatever commodity a customer might happen to need. Dozens of other characters filled out the cast — some vocalized by the Jordans, others simply talked about.

This simple format — owing much to the basic techniques pioneered by *Amos 'n' Andy* — carried *Smackout* thru a four-year run. Quinn quickly developed into an excellent writer — with a peculiarly absurd sense of humor that managed to be

both corny and innovative at the same time. By 1935, *Smackout* had become an established NBC network feature, and was attracting interest from sponsors. In late 1934, the Jordans and Quinn were approached by the Chicago advertising agency of Needham, Louis and Brorby — representatives of S. C. Johnson & Sons of Racine, Wisconsin. Johnson's Wax was interested in a new series for the spring of 1935 — but they didn't want *Smackout* in its daily serial format. Could Quinn turn it into a half-hour comedy-variety show?

He could — and he did. Luke Gray lost his country store, and changed his name to Fibber McGee. The characters of Marian and Jim were dropped — and Marian adopted an Irish dialect as Fibber's hard-

Fibber and the Famous Closet

"No, no, not that door! That's the hall closet!"

In the 24 years that Jim and Marian Jordan were on the air as *Fibber McGee and Molly*, their hall closet was opened 128 times.

The first was during *McGee* program number 238 on May 4, 1940 when the closet gag was used twice.

The last time the closet gag was used *live* was during their program number 738 on June 23, 1953, the next-to-last broadcast in their long-running 30-minute series which began on April 16, 1935. In those eighteen years, the closet had been opened 115 times and each time a sound effects man had performed the gag *live* before a howling studio audience who

usually rewarded the effect with appreciative applause.

When *Fibber McGee and Molly* moved to a 15-minute, five nights per week program (pre-recorded, without a studio audience) on October 5, 1953, the McGees continued to use the closet gag, but the sound effect was recorded and not performed live. Before the 15-minute series ended with program number 1,298 on March 23, 1956 they had opened the hall closet another 13 times, the final time on the final show.

The famous crash of Fibber's famous closet was not heard when Jim and Marian Jordan performed short comedy bits as *Fibber McGee and Molly* on NBC's *Monitor* series from June 1, 1957 thru September 6, 1959, but their closet gag has survived as possibly the best known sound effect from the golden age of radio.



edged wife Molly. The two characters were dropped into a rickety old touring car and sent on a rambling auto trip across the Midwest — and with that formula, *Fibber McGee and Molly* made its debut on April 16, 1935.

The Fibber and Molly heard in that premiere episode are scarcely recognizable today. Fibber is still basically Luke

Gray, with Jordan performing in a querulous old-man voice. Molly is far from being the gentle and understanding spouse familiar from later years of the series — during the first months of the show she was something of a battle-axe. But the essential elements were there: a bluffing, exaggerating leading man constantly brought down to earth by his straight-talking wife.

In September 1935, the McGees stopped off in a small town called “Wistful Vista,” where Fibber bought a raffle ticket on a new house — and his was the winning number. When the McGees moved into their new home at 79 Wistful Vista, the final ingredients fell into place, and *Fibber McGee and Molly* began to come into sharp focus.

Fibber McGee and Molly is often described by commentators as “vaudeville-like” in its approach to comedy, filled with fast-paced gags and exaggerated wordplay. But in fact the style of the series really has less to do with vaudeville influences than those of another important entertainment medium of the era: the comic strip.

Don Quinn had been a cartoonist before moving into radio — and it is clearly a cartoonist’s sensibility which shines thru



in his *Fibber* scripts. The characters themselves would have fit right in on the comic pages circa 1935 — Fibber bears a very strong resemblance to such inept comic-strip husbands as George Bungle (of “The Bungle Family”), and his exaggerating, filibustering speech reminds one a bit of Andy Gump. More important, the construction of Quinn’s scripts is very much that of a comic strip. Each episode is made up of a string of self-contained encounters with various comedy characters, all tied together by the thread of a common plot. The construction of these encounters is very much in the setup/punchline vein, and one could transcribe them to an actual comic strip form with nothing lost in the translation. Listening to *Fibber*, it’s very easy to visualize the program in terms of panel borders and speech balloons.

Once the basic structures of the series had been established, *Fibber McGee and Molly* maintained a remarkable consistency over the course of its run. Although supporting characters came and went over the years — and although Marian Jordan herself was off the series for over a year due to illness in 1937-39 — *Fibber McGee and Molly* actually changed very little from the

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mid-1930s forward. While other shows became slicker, more packaged, more processed, *Fibber* retained its homespun flavor, its slightly-off-center comic-strip view of life. Even the move from Chicago to Hollywood in 1939 failed to change the series. New elements and new running gags added to the show during its run — like Fibber's famous closet — served only to enhance this atmosphere. And even when Quinn himself finally left the series, his legacy remained — succeeding writers like Phil Leslie and Keith Fowler had learned the house style well, and helped *Fibber* endure into a ripe old age.

The half-hour weekly series ended in 1953, but the Jordans weren't ready to retire. *Fibber* returned that fall in a daily serial format which endured for three years, and then the series moved to NBC's week-end *Monitor* program in the form of brief comedy segments running thru the summer of 1959.

Marian Jordan fell ill in 1960, and died of ovarian cancer on April 7, 1961, bringing the long run of *Fibber McGee and Molly* to an end. But the show remained legendary — and when a ten-year run of episodes turned up in the archives of S. C. Johnson & Sons, the program became a success all over again, riding the nostalgia craze of the 1970s to renewed popularity in syndication.

Jim Jordan died on April 1st, 1988, having lived long enough to see his series enshrined as a broadcasting legend. Its pleasantly-corny humor undimmed by the passing years, *Fibber McGee and Molly* remains one of Old Time Radio's biggest crowd-pleasers — and it will likely be on the air, in some form, for as long as there is radio. ■

NOTE— Tune in TWTD on December 23 to hear the 1943 Fibber McGee and Molly Christmas show and again on January 13 to hear the 1935 program where they win their home in Wistful Vista.



Fibber McGee and Molly Cast for 1945-46 Season:

Frank Pittman (producer), from left, Bea Benaderet, Gale Gordon, Jim Jordan, Harlow Wilcox, Marian Jordan, Phil Leslie (writer), Billy Mills, Don Quinn (writer), Shirley Mitchell, Arthur Q. Brian