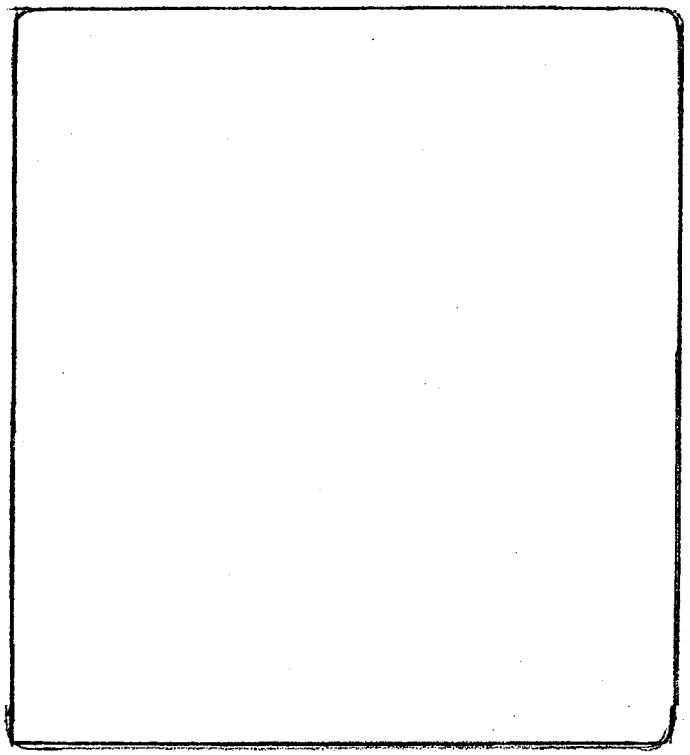
THEY'LL BREAK YOUR HEART

by

GEORGE BALZER

DEDICATED WITH DEEPEST ADMIRATION, RESPECT,

AND GRATITUDE TO:

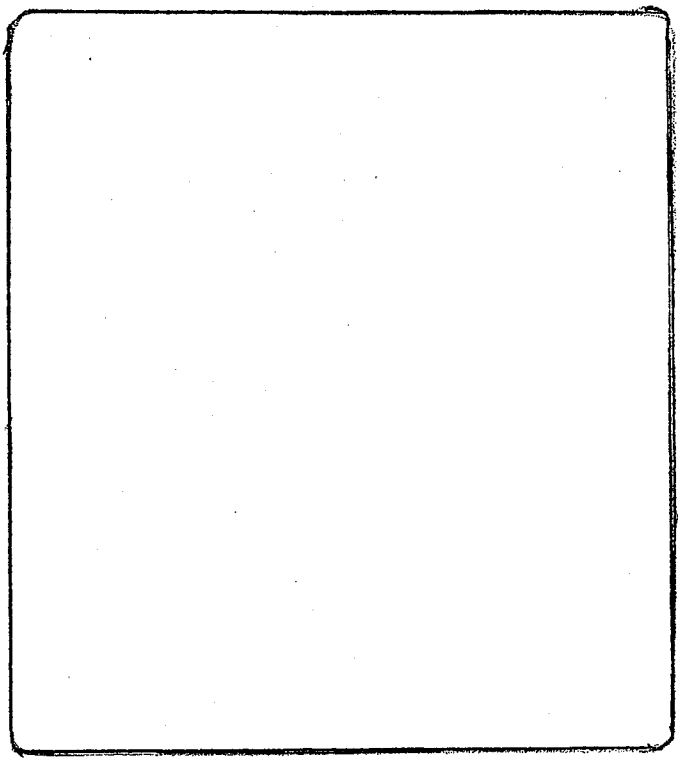


JACK BENNY
1894-1974

"I am first, because I'm the star and it's my show. Next to me come my four writers. After them, the director -- the parking lot attendant -- the producer -- the shoe shine boy -- the usher -- my manager -- and in any order you want to put them, but don't ever put anyone between me and my writers."

- MY FRIEND AND EMPLOYER -

AND TO:



ANDY DEVINE
1905 - 1977

...Whose help and encouragement came at the time it was needed most -- when I was trying to get started.

CHAPTER I

It's seven o'clock Sunday evening. My wife, Ada Marie, and I are sitting in the living room listening to Don Wilson, the radio announcer, say, "The Jack Benny Program - presented by Lucky Strike." This always happy announcement is punctuated by the Phil Harris Orchestra attacking a bright up-tempo arrangement of "Love In Bloom". After a few bars, the music fades out and L. A. Speed Riggs verbally triple tongues the dollar numbers in the chant of the tobacco auctioneer, ending with the melodic "All Done American". After the commercial, the "Love In Bloom" music fades back in and continues under, softly accompanying Don Wilson as he proudly intones the full billboard:

"THE LUCKY STRIKE PROGRAM STARRING JACK BENNY.. WITH MARY LIVINGSTONE, PHIL HARRIS, DENNIS DAY, ROCHESTER, AND YOURS TRULY, DON WILSON."

The music hits full and comes to a finish. Then with his jovial voice reverberating against the silence of anticipation, Don sets the program theme with an appropriate introduction, finishing with, "And now, ladies and gentlemen, here's the STAR of our show, JACK BENNY."

After the applause dies away, that beautifully distinctive voice known to millions says, "Thank you, thank you. Hello again. This is JACK BENNY talking."

I have heard that phrase hundreds of times but never has it had the impact it had tonight. You see, this is not a Sunday evening back in the nineteen thirties or forties. It's Sunday, December twenty-ninth, 1974, and only a few short hours ago my wife and I returned from Hillside Cemetery where we attended the funeral services and said our last goodbye to JACK BENNY.

As evening came on, I couldn't resist selecting from my collection of tapes a recording of one of Jack's old radio shows and playing it. When I heard his voice say, "Hello again..." I had an eerie feeling that someway, somehow, he had followed us home.

The recording, which I had picked at random, was a radio show broadcast from Palm Springs, California, on February Eleventh, 1951, just three days before Jack's birthday. In his introduction Don Wilson said, "JACK WAS TANNED BY THE DESERT SUN, TOUCHED BY THE DESERT WIND, AND FRIGHTENED BY THE DESERT PRICES." After the familiar "Hello again" greeting, Jack continued:

"...Don, you're right about one thing. I have got a beautiful tan..and why not? Every day I lay out beside the pool at the beautiful Palm Springs Biltmore Hotel. It's the most exclusive -- "

"Wait a minute, Jack...I don't like to correct your grammar, but it isn't 'lay' by the pool, it's 'lie'."

"Don, in this case, we're both right... You see, I don't live at The Biltmore... so in order to lay by the pool, I have to lie to the life guard...I've really got him fooled, too...I borrowed a bathing suit from Mary, and he thinks I'm Esther Williams."

This reference to Esther got a big laugh because everyone knew she was the popular swimming star. Don, as always, pursued the topic.

"Jack, you mean to say you wore Mary's two-piece bathing suit?"

"Uh huh...I'm gonna have a hard time explaining my tan to the boys in the steam room. Anyway, to change the subject, Don, did you get the invitation I sent you to my birthday party next Wednesday?"

"Yes, Jack, and there's something in it that I don't understand."

"What's that?"

"Well, it says: 'You are cordially invited to attend my birthday party on Wednesday, February 14th.'...Then down in the corner it says, 'Fifteen..Nine... Thirty-four.' What do these numbers mean?"

"They're the sizes of my shirts, slippers, and underwear. I used to put R.S.V.P., and I got nothing."

At this point, Mary Livingstone entered and was greeted with applause. Jack acknowledging her entrance said:

"Mary, let me look at you...I've never seen you looking so good. You've only been in Palm Springs four days and you're darker than I am."

"Well, Jack, I should be...I'm out in the sun from morning 'till night, and I walk all the time."

"Gee, I didn't know you were so athletic."

"Who's athletic? I can't find a room."

"Oh...Oh...Well, it is awfully crowded down here."

"You're not kidding...Yesterday I put a penny in a gum machine, pulled the lever, and a woman stuck her head out and said, 'Sorry, no vacancies'."

"Oh, yes, I know that gum machine... it's called The Juicy Fruit Hacienda... They're booked up until April."

Don, always one to help, interjected:

"Mary, if you wish, I'll try to get you a room at the Park Lane Hotel where I'm living."

Jack then suggested:

"And Mary, if you can't get into the Park Lane, why don't you try the place I'm staying?"

"Oh, you're at The Bon Aire, aren't you?"

"Well, I couldn't get in there so I'm staying at The El Tonto Trailer Camp."

"Trailer Camp? Jack, you haven't got a trailer."

"Mary, they rent you the space..how you sleep they don't care...It's very informal. At night we all sit around the camp fire and sing Western songs."

Jack then gave a corny imitation of a singing cowboy:

"I'm an Old Cowhand..from the Rio Grande."

This caused Mary to laugh and Don to ask:

"What are you laughing at, Mary?"

"At Jack...You should have seen him yesterday standing in front of the drug store wearing that cowboy outfit of his."

Jack, defending himself:

"Mary, when you're in Palm Springs, you're supposed to dress like a tough westerner."

"Some tough westerner. Your spurs still had dough on 'em from cutting out cookies."

"I made 'em for my party...You're gonna come, aren't you, Mary?"

"Yes, Jack, but there was something on your invitation that I didn't understand. It said, 'You are cordially invited to attend my birthday party on Wednesday, February 14th.'...and down in the corner it said, 'N.M.B.S.' What does it mean?"

"Need man's bathing suit, how long can I keep fooling people?"

Then Dennis Day, the always popular Irish tenor stepped to the microphone and was greeted by Jack:

"Oh, hello, Dennis."

"Hello, Mr. Benny...Well...here I am."

"So I see. What are you gonna sing, Dennis?"

"Can I have some dialogue first, I got friends in the audience."

"Oh yes, yes, of course...I'm sorry. Tell me, kid, have you been having fun while we've been here in Palm Springs?"

"OH BOY, HAVE I!"

"Good."

"I will now sing 'Goodnight Irene'."

"Now wait a minute...you said you wanted some dialogue, didn't you?"

"My friends just left."

"Oh, well, go ahead and sing."

"Okay, Mr. Benny, but first do you mind if I ask you something?"

"No, kid, what is it?"

"Well, I received your invitation..and it said: 'You are cordially invited to attend my birthday party on Wednesday, February 14th.'"

"Uh huh."

"And down in the corner it said: 'B.T.B.T.K. W.I.N.' What does that mean?"

"Go to Bullocks, They Know What I Need... Now let's have your song."

While Dennis was singing, my wife commented on the incongruity of that beautiful Irish voice coming from a radio character that was supposed to be so stupid. Though the sad events

of the past three days kept running through our minds, we continued to listen. Dennis finished his song and after the applause, Jack said:

"That was 'To Think You've Chosen Me', sung by Dennis Day...But Dennis, you said you were gonna sing 'Goodnight Irene.'"

To which Dennis replied: "You gotta watch me, I'm cagey."

"I'll watch you, I'll watch you... Well, anyway, it was very good, and it would've sounded even better if the orchestra wasn't out of tune."

This disparaging remark about the orchestra caused Phil Harris to spring to the defense of his musicians:

"Wait a minute, Jackson, hold it... hold it..hold it!"

"Phil!"

"Now look, Jackson, I don't mind your picking on me personally, but lay off my boys. They held a meeting and they don't want you to make any more remarks about them."

"Remarks?"

"Especially when we're away from home... They demand respect."

"Oh, they do, eh? They want respect. Phil, just look at they. Take Sammy, your drummer...His head reminds me of my baby picture...And the way Bagby plays the piano, he looks like he's typing a letter to his parole board...And finally with great delight we come to Remley."

"And what, pray tell, is wrong with Remley?"

"What's wrong with him? Take a look at the coat he's wearing. On the back it says 'NO PARKING.'"

"Well, how do you like that, they must have painted the curbs last night."

"Yes, they must've...But Phil, as long as we're on the subject of music, we might as well settle it right now...Not only did your boys play Dennis' song badly, but it was a very poor arrangement."

"Look, Tonto, just tend to the comedy and keep your nose out of my business."

"Well, it happens to be my business, too. After all, who's the star of this show?"

"When I see my pay check, I know it ain't me."

"Phil -- "

"Alice gets more than I do just for signing her autograph."

"Then the moral of the story is 'learn to write.'"

The routine between the two of them continued, reaching a point where Jack finally told Phil to go sit down, to which Phil replied:

"Okay...Jackson..But there's something I want to ask you about that invitation you sent me and my orchestra boys."

"What about it?"

"Well, it says: 'You and your boys are cordially invited to attend my birthday party on Wednesday, February 14th.'... And down in the corner, it says, 'W.T.F.'... What does that mean?"

"Wash Their Faces...On second thought, don't wash Bagby's face, I hate to think what might be underneath."

"Ad lib another one, Jackson, I love the way it makes your eyes sparkle."

"Thank you. It's about time you appreciated my ---"

The reels of the tape player went 'round and 'round with every turn releasing those bright, familiar voices out of the past. Hearing them again helped to blot out the sadness that was in our

hearts. In the last scene Jack was supposed to be building a home in Palm Springs. It was nearly complete and he went out to the property to see how things were coming along. The part of the contractor was played by Frank Nelson. Frank was the character who always answered Jack's "Oh, Mister.. Mister," with an elongated "Yyyyeeeeessss."

In this particular scene when Jack inquired, "Are you the contractor?" Frank with his usual sarcasm replied, "No, I've got these blue prints just because they match your eyes." Later, on the tour of inspection, Jack, pointing to some windows, said, "Do these windows open?" and Frank, used this opportunity to hit him with his emotionally enthusiastic, "Oooooooh, do they!" The tour of the new home continued:

"...And here, Mr. Benny, is the hallway."

"Say, Mr. Nelson...we've been going all through the house and I haven't seen any bathroom."

"Oh my goodness, we forgot to build one."

"You forgot to build one? Well, what're you going to do?"

"I'm gonna give you a flashlight and a pair of slippers."

"You are not, you're gonna build one... Now Mr. Nelson, where's my bedroom?"

"The Master Bedroom?...Here it is, right here."

We then heard a door open, followed by Jack saying:

"Say, it looks kinda...ROCHESTER!"

"OH...OH...OH....HELLO, MISTER BENNY."

Hearing this scratchy gravel voice of Jack's Negro butler, the audience roared with laughter and broke into applause. Roch was always a highlight. Jack continued.

"Rochester, what are you doing here?"

"I moved in already."

"But the house isn't ready yet...and besides, your room is over the garage."

"You ain't got a garage."

"What?"

"Last night the termites had a party and served it buffet style."

"Rochester, you mean to tell me that termites ate up my whole garage?"

"All but the cement floor...They saved that for dancing."

"Well, this is terrible...I left my violin in there."

"They ate that, too."

"How do you know?"

"They sent out for bicarbonate of soda."

"Rochester, if you saw them eating my violin, why didn't you stop them?"

"By the time I got here, they were using the strings for dental floss."

"Look, Rochester, you can stop all this silly talk and you're not getting the Master Bedroom...Now take your twelve trunks and get them out of here."

"Okay, you win...Come on, Jezebel."

To Rochester's command, a dog barked several times.

"Oh, fine, he had to bring a dog in my new house."

"Don't worry, Boss..I gave him a flashlight and four bedroom slippers."

"Good, good."

A few minutes more and it was over. Because the show had played well, the spread (time allowed for laughs) was insufficient, causing Jack to quickly say, as he had so many, many times, "We're a little late, goodnight folks," followed by Don Wilson's "The Jack Benny Program is written by Sam Perrin, George Balzer, Milt Josefsberg, and John Tackaberry."

The "Love In Bloom" music again faded in to be joined by loud studio audience applause and together they both swelled to a finish, which was abruptly followed by...silence. A silence broken only by the loose, flapping end of the dangling tape.

As I turned off the tape player, I had a great sense of personal pride for I was indeed one of Jack's writers. It was a privilege and a relationship that lasted for twenty-five years --

covering radio, television, stage concerts, benefits..any public appearance requiring prepared material. He considered his writers a part of his family. I heard him say in interviews -- and to me, personally -- when talking about his staff:

"I, Jack Benny, am first because I'm the star and it's my show."

This he would always say with a twinkle in his eye, then continue more seriously, "Next to me come my four writers -- after them, the Director, the parking lot attendant, the Producer, the shoe shine boy, the ushers, my manager -- and in any order you want to put them, but don't ever put anyone between me and my writers."

He was sincere. To him, his writers were the closest members of his professional family. This was known by all and resented by some.

With the passing of Jack Benny, an era in the world of entertainment came to an end and I shall always be grateful for having had a small part in it.

CHAPTER II

Outside in the darkness a chilly wind was blowing. My thoughts took me back -- back beyond the sadness of the past three days -- back to what, for me, was the beginning ---

It was mid-summer nineteen forty-three, when the Young and Rubicam Advertising Agency told me that I was one of those chosen to make up the new writing staff for the top-rated Benny Radio Show. Up to this time, I had never met Jack; nor would I be able to meet him until we started working. The reason was, at the close of the previous season, he had immediately headed up a show for the U.S.O. and had spent the entire summer entertaining American Armed Forces in North Africa. A few days later, when I signed the contract, I was told that the opening program would originate in New York City and I would have to go there to meet Mr. Benny when he returned from overseas.

Driving home, I kept thinking to myself -- New York-- New York -- was there really such a place or was it just a fictitious city they wrote songs about? Songs in which people asked other people to give their regards to a street -- and some Square named Harold to whom or which they wanted to be remembered. And what about this alley that was famous for its tin pans? Well, I was soon going to find out.

On a Friday morning in September, Ada Marie drove me downtown to the Los Angeles Union Station. World War II was in full swing and Union Station, like all railroad stations throughout the country, was a scene of frantic activity. Due to military requirements, train space was at a premium. People, in and out of uniform, were running in all directions. Arrivals and departures were constantly being announced over the public address system, but not once did a crazy train announcer say, "TRAIN LEAVING ON TRACK FIVE FOR ANAHEIM, AZUSA, AND CUC--A--MONGA." The reason being my writing for the Benny Show hadn't started, so that character, so beautifully played by Mel Blanc, hadn't been created yet.

While my wife and I stood there waiting for the exciting "Alll-aboooard", we could hardly believe how fast things were happening for us. We had only been married about a year and a half, and now, with a bulging suitcase, I was leaving to join Jack Benny. She was staying home because she was about six months into a slight case of pregnancy evidenced by the usual swelling. I guess, in a way, you could say we were both packed.

At the station,I met for the first time Mary Livingstone (Mrs. Benny) and their daughter, Joan. Joanny was about eight years old at the time and was accompanied by a governess, a lovely English lady named Miss Valance. Mr. Bert Scott, Jack's personal secretary, would be travelling with us to handle all the details. I also met a fellow writer named Milt Josefsberg. Milt had written a few years for Bob Hope and now he, too, was joining the Benny staff. Suddenly, the P.A. System reminded us of what we were waiting for by calling out: "ATTENTION, ATTENTION, PLEASE -- NOW LOADING ON TRACK EIGHT, THE SANTA FE CHIEF, FOR SAN BERNARDINO, BARSTOW, ALBUQUERQUE AND CHICAGO --ALLLLLL-ABOOOARD."

While walking down the long corridor to the loading platform, I was very much aware that up to this moment my travelling, except for a trip west from Pennsylvania at a very early age, had been confined to a small area of California. When we arrived at the train, Bert Scott handed me my ticket, my baggage check and my hotel reservation. Though I was twenty-eight years old, I was tempted to ask him to write a note with "If Lost Instructions" and pin it on my lapel.

I kissed Ada Marie goodbye and a few moments later, as I sat at the window, the train started to move and I was on my way toward the unknown. The train soon left the city limits of Los Angeles, stopped momentarily in Pasadena and then clickety-clacked its way eastward. It did not go through Anaheim, but it did go through Azusa and Cucamonga. Within the hour, I was further east than I had been in over twenty years.

Milt and I shared a compartment, and since we were both comedy writers starting on a new job, we had much to talk about. I soon learned from Milt that he was once a Press Agent. This bit of information I have always remembered, not only because I was impressed, but because he never let me forget it. Jack's previous writers, Bill Morrow and Ed Beloin, were with Jack Benny for five or six years and toward the end were joined by Bob O'Brien. At the close of the last season, Morrow was drafted into the Army, Beloin wanted to write for pictures, and Bob went with Eddie Cantor. I didn't know much about them, but Milt told me that Bill was quite a heavy drinker. In his travels with the Benny Show, he would come to the railroad station with his two large suitcases filled with liquor. Over his arm he would be carrying his suit, sport coat, two or three pair of slacks, ties, shirts, sox and underwear. When I heard this, I said to myself, "That makes a lot of sense. When a man is in a condition where at any moment he might fall down, it's certainly a lot more comfortable to fall on an armload of clothes than an armload of bottles."

I later discovered that Milt was also addicted to the bottle. Only in his case it wasn't liquor, it was Ketchup. That's right, Ketchup. Not just any kind -- it had to be "Heinz", and he wouldn't trust a label. In the years that followed, on more than one occasion, I have seen Milt in a crowded restaurant shaking his finger in the waiter's face accusing him of filling the Heinz bottle with a different brand. There is

no food on which Milt will not put Ketchup. You haven't lived until you've had dinner with a man who orders ice cream and then proceeds to make a Ketchup Sundae.

The second night out we were sitting in the Parlor Car discussing our trip to New York. I again learned from Milt that he used to be a Press Agent. I also learned he was born in Brooklyn. He told me for him this trip was really going home. As he said the words, "going home", a smile appeared on his face. I thought to myself how nice for a grown man to still find time to be sentimental. Upon our arrival in New York, I found out his smile did not come from sentiment. It came from knowing, instead of living at a hotel, he would be sleeping and eating at his mother's house and putting the expense money in his pocket.

The next morning I got up early, excitedly anticipating the arrival in Chicago. In Chicago, New York passengers would leave the Chief at the Dearbourn Station, have a leisurely lunch at a fine restaurant, such as Henricis, then casually cab over to the LaSalle Street Station where they would board New York Central's crack train, The Twentieth Century Limited. At precisely five o'clock the train would embark on its overnight run to New York -- by way of Toledo, Cleveland, Erie, Buffalo and Albany -- arriving at nine in the morning, right smack in the center of the City. However, on this day, due to rail priorities given trains moving military personnel and supplies, the Chief due in at noon rolled into Chicago four hours late.

Knowing that Mr. Scott would be taking care of Mary and Joanie, Milt suggested that we grab our bags and, even before the train came to a stop, head for the forward end. He explained, "In this way we will save time." I still think it was an ingenious excuse to go through the dining car so he could say a last good-bye to a bottle of Ketchup.

After a wild cab ride across town, we boarded the Twentieth Century Limited just as it was pulling out. We looked at each other and verbally sighed, "We made it." Little did we know our space had been sold. The conductors worked feverishly, and after hours of juggling and doubling, all the passengers had a place to sleep. However, thinking of the next morning's destination, I don't think I closed my eyes all night. After tossing and turning through Cleveland, Erie, Buffalo and Albany, I was up, dressed, and sitting in the Observation Car when the train started down along that last leg, the Hudson River. I looked out the window and noticed we were passing Sing Sing Prison, a place I had learned about through a radio program called "Gangbusters." A short while later, the train arrived at its destination, on time, and in the center of the city.

With suitcase in hand, I quickly found my way out of the station. As I stood there on the corner, I didn't know if it was Eastside of Westside. I only knew that for the first time in my life, I was on the sidewalks of New York. A taxi took me to 54th and 6th Avenue. The subway took Milt to Brooklyn. At about the same moment I checked into the Warwick Hotel, Milt was checking into his mother's refrigerator.

Check-out time was still two hours away, so my room was not yet available. This situation gave me a choice. I could sit in the lobby and wait, or I could stroll around the city. Since there was so much I wanted to see, it was an easy decision. I started out and soon I was walking down Fifth Avenue past Saint Patrick's Cathedral -- Rockefeller Center. I was so interested in the height of the buildings, three different times I walked into trash barrels. After begging their pardons, I continued on and several blocks later I took a right turn and suddenly realized I was doing exactly what I had been urged to do every Friday Night by the M.C. of a radio program called "First Nighter." "Up 42nd Street across Broadway to the Little Theater off Times Square." It was the imaginary locale for a series of radio plays starring Don Ameche, June Meredith, Betty Lou Gerson, Les Tremayne, Olan Soule and Barbara Luddy. It was only a mythical theater, but nevertheless, it had a strict rule which permitted "smoking in the outer lobby only."

When I reached the famous crossroads, the sidewalks were filled with people and the streets were not only bumper to bumper, but curb to curb with taxi cabs. When I first saw that mass of yellow, I wondered if maybe the hour of midnight was approaching and all the exciting events of the past few days were turning into a pumpkin. I convinced myself that the very thought of such a thing was absurd, silly and ridiculous. I then caught myself looking down to see if I was wearing a glass slipper. I assure you, I wasn't. I had on a plain, ordinary

pair of shoes, one of which had a hole in it. It was no fantasy. I was truly there in Times Square with the bottom of one foot actually on the sidewalks of New York.

As I started up Broadway, I had a feeling I was someone important. And why not? The man on the Camel Sign was blowing smoke rings at me, and on the traffic island under the Coca-Cola sign, stood the head of my reception committee, Father Duffy. Father Duffy was a Chaplain in the First World War and upon closer inspection, I discovered he was now a statue. I thought this discovery was brilliant until I noticed an abundance of evidence that hundreds of pigeons had made the same observation. As I stood there feeling sorry for Father Duffy, I guess I must have been quite motionless, because soon, I, too, suffered the same fate. At first I was upset. Then I realized it taught me a lesson I hope I'll never forget. The lesson being, "When a man is tempted to be egotistical, it only takes one bird to express an opinion that is probably shared by many people." Yes, that pigeon gave me a message. My only regret was that it wasn't tied to his leg.

Back at the Hotel, I took the elevator and arrived at my room just as the previous occupant was leaving. I was tired and really looking forward to taking a nap, but I didn't particularly care about getting into a strange bed that was still warm. As I sat there in a chair, I couldn't help thinking, "Here I am in one of the world's largest cities and yet I am all alone." My thoughts were of my wife who was three thousand miles away.

I decided that being lonely in New York was entirely unnecessary, so I stepped over to the phone and called the desk clerk. He was very nice and gave me the information I wanted. I straightened my tie, put on my coat and, following the desk clerk's directions, I took the elevator up three floors. I stepped out into the hall, found the room number I had been given and knocked on the door. While I stood there waiting, I don't mind telling you I was a little nervous because for me this would be a first time. I was about to knock again when the door opened and framed in the doorway -- wearing nothing but a flimsy dressing gown -- stood John Tackaberry. John was the third member of the new writing staff and we had not previously met.

I introduced myself and Mr.Tackaberry invited me in. He explained his delay in answering the door was because he was in the shower. From his accent and the little puddles at his feet, I was able to deduce he was a wet Texan. This was confirmed when he told me his home town was Houston. From the bathroom where he was getting dressed, he called out to me, "If you're interested, I have a bottle." I quickly replied, "No thanks." He might be another Milt and I wasn't in the mood for Ketchup.

After addressing him as Mr. Tackaberry several times, he asked me to please call him Tack. Not because he was sharp as one, but "Tack" having only four letters was shorter than Tackaberry, which to me made sense, until I figured out his first name "John" only had four letters, too. Tack's previous

writing assignment was with Horace Heidt on the Pot of Gold radio program. We hit it off well and after some lengthy light conversation, we decided to go to dinner. As we walked up 54th Street, he said, "George, isn't New York an exciting city?" Because I didn't want a Texan to think I was easily impressed, I answered with a casual, "Oh, I don't know - when you've seen one city, you've seen 'em all." Having told this blatant lie, I promised myself the next time I passed Father Duffy's statue, I would go to confession.

We had dinner at Jack Dempsey's Restaurant. While waiting for, during and after our food, Tack had several cocktails, completely dispelling the question I had earlier about the contents of that bottle in his room. On the way back to the hotel, we made a decision that would be financially beneficial to both of us. We decided to share a room. The next morning he moved in. This meant Tack and I were each saving half on our hotel room expense. Now if we could only find a way to share in that food Milt was getting out of his mother's refrigerator.

During the next few days, there was time for more sightseeing...Radio City Music Hall...Rockefeller Center...Wall Street...The Battery...I shall never forget my first view of the Statue of Liberty. When I saw that arm - that hand, raised skyward, I silently wondered if maybe she was -- just then a skid-row bum who was standing nearby and had evidently observed the expression on my face, interjected with, "Don't get conceited -- she waves at everybody."

Then word came -- the military plane flying Jack Benny and his U.S.O. Troupe home from North Africa had landed in New York and we were alerted to stand by and be ready for a meeting as soon as it could be set up. Because we had to stay close by, Milt came in from Booklyn and had a surprise for me. The previous Friday evening he was having dinner with his family and the label on the Sacramental Wine bottle caught his eye. In small print it said, "This wine was blessed by Rabbi Balzer." When he showed the label to me, I said, "I find that very interesting. However, I don't think I'm a Rabbi because only yesterday I was in Saint Patrick's Cathedral fulfilling my Sunday obligation."

Which reminds me of another interesting thing that happened. It was the first time in my life I had ever been in the world-famous Saint Pats. During the Mass I sat there minding my own business, when all of a sudden an usher put a basket in my lap and signaled I was to help take up the collection. I was a little stunned. I had taken up collection before -- in several churches -- but now I was being asked to play the Palace.

While working my section of the pews, I looked across the aisle and saw a gentleman named Jim Farley performing the same duty. For those who may not remember, during the Roosevelt years, Mr. Farley was one of the country's important political leaders. In fact, he served in President Roosevelt's Cabinet as Postmaster General. In later years, this coincidence gave me

opportunities to have some fun. At parties, whenever politics would be the subject of conversation, I would casually throw in, "You know, at one time I had the same job as Jim Farley." Having aroused everyone's interest, I would then walk away. Before the evening was over, at least a dozen people would call me aside and ask me about it. I would then explain to them the incident at Saint Pats and then they would walk away -- obviously disappointed. Years later, I had occasion to meet Mr. Farley in person. I told him how at one time I had the same job as he had. Then after I explained the whole story, he looked disappointed. I guess it was better when Mr. Farley and the joke were both twenty years younger.

CHAPTER III

The waiting hours, filled by playing Gin Rummy, were brought to an end by the ringing of the phone. It was a message from the Advertising Agency, "The writers are to be at Mr. Benny's hotel at three o'clock." It was a nice day and we decided to walk, notwithstanding the hole in my shoe which by now was considerably larger. A hole which got there in the first place, not with standing, but with walking.

When we arrived at The Sherry Netherland, we were directed to a conference room crowded with reporters, photographers and newsreel cameras. After a short wait, Mr. Benny and the members of his U.S.O. Troupe walked in. Introductions were made and when Jack Benny and I shook hands, neither of us had the slightest idea it was the start of an association that was to last almost thirty-five years.

The Newsreel Cameras were ready to roll and the members of the U.S.O. Troupe, Larry Adler, Winnie Shaw and Anna Lee took their positions around the Star. However, Jack, being a man who always wanted things done properly called the writers aside and asked if we could think of something that would keep the interview from being dull and stilted -- something to make it more entertaining. After a little thought, I made a suggestion. I suggested that as each of the reporters directed their questions about the overseas trip to Jack, the other Troupe members should take turns, jumping in with the answer after the Star had said only a word or two. The idea was nothing momentous, but Jack liked it and as each question was asked, Jack's attempt to respond was always interrupted by others supplying the answer. At the end of three minutes of questions, Jack's verbal contribution was a "well", two "buts", one "oh", an "I think" and one or two other innocuous phrases.

During the filming there was an added fillip for me. There were more questions than there were newsmen and Jack asked me if I would play the part of a reporter. Being a bit of a ham, I jumped at the opportunity. While the cameras were rolling, I asked my question, and I don't remember if Jack answered with a "well," a "but", or an "oh." I do remember, however, when the cameras and lights were turned off, I put down my prop notes and casually walked over to the window. I looked out at the city and mentally summed up all that had happened to me -- a country boy -- in such a short time. The trip to New York, temporarily holding the same job as Jim Farley -- meeting Jack Benny -- having my first suggestion accepted -- and now

in a few hours, I would be seen in newsreels all over the country. I must admit, because I'm human, I enjoyed a personal inner satisfaction. As I stood there at the window, my ego continued to expand. Then suddenly, I looked up and saw a pigeon circling overhead. I don't know if pigeons can smile, but this one had a look on its face that seemed to tell me I was fortunate I wasn't out on the balcony.

With this first meeting over, we went back to our hotel. That night Milt stayed in the city. I don't remember exactly why, but it could very well be he had to attend a Ketchup Anonymous Meeting.

A day or so later, we were summoned to meet with Jack in his suite on the 33rd floor of The Sherry. It was at this meeting I first met the fourth writer, Cy Howard. Cy was the only member of the new team hired directly by Jack, if I remember correctly. Jack was on his way to North Africa, and while changing trains in Chicago met Cy in the railroad station. At the end of this short meeting, he had the job. This is understandable when you realize that Cy is a man of effusive enthusiasm. When talking to you, he gets very close. So close, if you were putting your coat on at the time, you would button him in. If perchance your coat was already on, your lapels became boat bottoms and he was a barnacle. At the end of a conversation with Cy, you don't just part, you scrape him off.

Another person I met at that time was a young lady named Jane Tucker. She was a script girl and had worked the show the

previous year. When we got down to discussing the various elements of the show, Jane took it all down in shorthand and the next day she handed each of us a typed copy.

The purpose of this particular meeting was to get a premise for the opening broadcast. Jack worked with us, and before the day ended, we knew exactly what he wanted to do. At the close of this meeting, Jack called me aside and said, "George, where's Sam?" He was referring to Sam Perrin, my writing partner. Sam had done some writing for Jack previously, but had difficulty making a contractual agreement with those in charge and elected to stay on the west coast until the show returned. I explained this to Jack and he immediately placed a call to California and straightened things out. Sam would join the show later when we got back to Hollywood.

The four writers and Jack met again the next day, reviewed our premise and got down to serious writing. Since Jack was a comedian who hated to contrive, his shows were based as much as possible on true happenings. In this case, he had just been in North Africa, therefore, our premise was simple. On our opening show, we would do a scene at the airport where some members of his cast were waiting for his plane to land. There would then be a cab ride to the hotel where Dennis Day, Phil Harris and Rochester would be waiting to greet the returning star.

The first day we wrote three or four pages of script. All words and lines that were agreed upon were taken down by

Jane to be typed that evening and handed out the next morning. The next day we took the newly typed pages and carefully fixed and changed right from the beginning. Then we wrote another five or six pages of fresh material and the following day it, too, received the same scrutiny. Jack was being very careful and understandably so. He was radio's top comedian with writers who had never worked for him before and he wanted to sure everything was just right.

During that first week, each writer became concerned about how they, personally as an individual writer, were doing. In seeking an answer to this important question, I soon found a guage that could be relied upon. At that time, Jack was a man who used many cigars. I say "used" rather than "smoked" because after lighting one, he would soon lay it down and that would be it. Jack's cigars cost one dollar each and on any one of them he would smoke no more than the sales tax. Sometimes, after the cigar went out, he wouldn't relight it, but would continue to chew on it. Not wanting this "cigar chewing" to become habitual, he was trying very hard to quit. His method was to keep an empty pipe in his mouth. Of course, when you suck on an empty pipe, saliva accumulates in the bowl. All day long as we continued writing, Jack would have that pipe in his mouth. With his great sense of humor, he laughed very easily. If he was particularly pleased at a funny line, he would not only laugh, but would approach the writer who had said it. Then, as you sat there in the chair, he would hover over you, still laughing,

and supporting himself by putting his left hand on your right shoulder. Now, that alone would be appreciation enough, but he didn't stop there. Jack, still laughing, would pump his right arm, the one holding the pipe, up and down on a forty-five degree angle from your right shoulder down to your left hip. From centrifugal force, the moisture in the pipe bowl would work its way back up the stem and out onto your coat. I experienced this several times, but didn't say anything because I realized this angular trail of moisture was my guage. I told the others, "If you come out of the writing sessions looking like an ambassador, you know you've had a good day." You didn't even have to worry about shrinkage. All you had to do was start a conversation with Cy and he'd automatically stretch your lapels back into shape.

Several days later, the script was finished and sent off to be mimeographed. On the following Saturday at noon the entire cast gathered at the N.B.C. Studios at Rockefeller Center for rehearsal. It was at this meeting I first met Don Wilson, Phil Harris, Dennis Day and Eddie Anderson (Rochester).

After the script reading, all were dismissed except Jack, the writers, Jane, the script girl, and Walter Bunker, the producer. During the next two hours, we put in some new jokes, polished others and cut the script to time. On Sunday afternoon we had a microphone rehearsal, trimmed another thirty seconds out of the script and at 7 P.M. Sunday evening, October 19th,

the Jack Benny Show went on the air with the opening program of the 1943-44 season.

As I indicated earlier, the premise was simple. Don Wilson set the scene saying, "Ladies and Gentlemen, as you probably know, Jack Benny has just returned from a camp tour overseas...So let's go back a few days to La Guardia Airport and show you what happened when his plane arrived."

We then did a scene at the airport where Mary and Don awaited Jack's arrival. This was followed by a short scene in the airplane involving the pilot and Jack. The plane landed and after the welcome back greetings from Don and Mary, the three of them took a taxi to Jack's hotel, The Acme Plaza.

When Jack told the cab driver where it was located, the driver said, "I know, I know, I used to live there...then I got a job."

Jack, of course, defended the place and urged the driver to hurry because he had been on a long trip and wanted to take a bath. To this, the driver quickly replied,"Don't worry, Bud, I'll get you there so fast, you'll be the first in line."

Jack then started telling Don and Mary about an exciting incident that happened one night overseas saying, "You see, Larry Adler was with me and Winnie Shaw and Anna Lee and we --"

Discovering who Jack was and that he had been in North Africa entertaining the troops, the cabby interrupted to ask, if Jack had run into his brother whose name was Crowley, "Joe Crowley?" Jack said no, he hadn't. Then returning to his story, "Well, anyway kids, Larry and I and the girls were at this camp..

it was midnight and there was a full moon...and, of course, no one ever thought..."

The cabby again interrupted with, "Funny..Joe's the kind of guy you'd pick out anyplace."

"I'm sorry, driver, but I didn't see him...So Mary, get this...here it was midnight and nobody was..."

"Cracks his knuckles a lot, funny you didn't hear him."

Jack, frustrated and wanting to get his point across, "Look, driver, I travelled 32,000 miles...I was all over North Africa..I met thousands and thousands of soldiers."

The driver pursued with, "But Joe's a Corporal."

Jack, hoping to close the subject, "Well, I'm sorry, I didn't see him...Now Mary, where was I?"

True to her character, Mary, taking advantage of the situation, repled, "It was midnight and Joe was a Corporal."

Before Jack could finish his story, they arrived at the Acme Plaza Hotel where we did routines with Dennis, Rochester, and Phil. Also, Don Wilson did an integrated commercial for Grape Nuts and Grape Nuts Flakes. (For a good many years, listeners associated The Jack Benny Show with Jello and its six delicious flavors: strawberry, raspberry, cherry, orange, lemon and lime, but actually Jello was the sponsor for only two seasons.)

During the show, we planted the fact that Jack had written letters to all the members of his cast while he was overseas, but not one of them were ever received. When pressed about how he

sent them, Jack explained he heard there was a current in the Mediterranean that goes into the Gulf Stream which flows around the tip of Florida, then northward to New York. So, he wrote the letters, put them in bottles, threw them in the ocean and he "can't understand what held them up." This, of course, brought forth much ridicule from the cast.

At the very end of the show there was a knock on the door. Rochester answered it and announced, "There is an octopus here with a special delivery letter for Miss Livingstone."

With this revelation, Jack looked at Mary and said, "You see, you see, I know what I'm doing every day of the week, sister."

At exactly seven twenty-nine and thirty seconds, it was all over. With the N.B.C. chimes ringing in my ears, we left the Studio.

Yes, the first show was finished, but the moment of truth was yet to come. In the morning papers, the radio critics would have their say.

A short while after sunrise, I found myself in the hotel lobby waiting for the newsstand to open. When it did, I picked up a paper, quickly turned to the radio section and read a column called:

LISTENING IN

With Ben Gross

"Triumphing over handicaps that would have downed a less lucky and talented comedian, Jack Benny opened his new radio season last

evening (WEAF-7). Just back from a 32,000-mile trip overseas, where he had entertained our soldiers, Benny started his series with but little preparation - and with an entirely new group of script writers.

His broadcast was by far the best of his openers in recent years. Jack, as you know, has had a reputation for starting his seasons a bit weakly and then really getting hot as the weeks go on. Last night, however, he and his old gang came across with an airing that was smooth, slick, polished and packed with laughs.

EXCLUSIVE!...Four new writers made this show possible. Here for the first time, their names are revealed. Their identities have been the biggest secret of Radio Row for the last week. But here they are: George Balzer, Milt Josefsberg, former press agent and last year with Bob Hope, John Tackaberry, and Cy Howard."

The review continued in the same vein to the very end. It put me in such a good mood, I bought the paper. On Wednesday, WEEKLY VARIETY hit the streets and again we were delighted to read:

"JACK BENNY...No returned program to the networks this season has stirred so much post-initial broadcast comment in the trade as Jack Benny's. The show had the cognoscenti shaking their heads over the comic's ability to sit down with an entirely new corps of writers and within the space of ten days whip together a program that sounded about as explosively entertaining as anything turned out in the heyday of Ed Beloin and Bill Morrow.

The cross fire centered completely around the comic's recent tour of U.S. service camps in Africa, Sicily and the Middle East and the decorum, taste and fine sense of comedy values with which Benny treated this background might well serve as a model for his confreres in the medium. The reunion of Benny with his troupe was replete with the old, skilled touches of fast jibe and barb. The material was fresh, crisp and scintillating. Benny's regular line-flinging henchfolk were all alertly on the mark. The special complement of bit contributors added much to the laugh din and Dennis Day was in extremely fine voice. In brief, it was grade AA Benny fare."

After reading these reviews, I was sure of one thing. The Jack Benny radio season was made up of thirty-five shows and at this point we were one down with thirty-four to go.

On Wednesday the second show got under way. Our working pattern remained pretty much the same, except for one change. Cy Howard felt he could write better working alone rather than in a group. This he did, while Milt, Tack and I continued working directly with Jack. The second show premise was also simple and had a continuity carried over from the opening show. Again we used the cab driver who couldn't understand why Jack hadn't met his brother, Corporal Crowley, in North Africa. We also incorporated an idea having Jack be very military because of his recent experience with the troops in the war zone. His attitude was that of a General and Mary referred to him as "Old Blood and Guts"...after General Patton. We did one routine where Jack had his new writers out in the hall drilling them. The final spot was a sketch based on the picture "Casablanca."

When the script was finished, Jack informed us that the parts of the new writers would be played by none other than his new writers. Now, this news about appearing on coast to coast radio frightened the other writers, but not me. Show business was in my blood and I had great experience. After all, just ten days ago, wasn't I in a newsreel? But seriously, we were all a little nervous about our radio debut. However, Jack believed his shows worked better when he used the real people, so we agreed to do it.

The rehearsals with script polishing and cutting were a duplication of the week before, and Sunday evening at seven o'clock Eastern Time, the second program of the new Jack Benny season went on the air.

For those who might be interested, the following routine is the one Jack did with the writers:

(SOUND: COUPLE OF FOOTSTEPS, DOOR OPENS, MARCHING FOOTSTEPS)

JACK: (AS TOUGH DRILL SERGEANT) Hup, tup, thrup, four...Hup, tup, thrup, four..WRITERS...HALT!

(SOUND: MARCHING FOOTSTEPS STOP)

JACK: PRESENT...PENCILS!...A fine bunch of comedy writers...recruits from the Fred Allen program...Rookies, every one a rookie... Just look at you...BALZER, PULL IN YOUR TYPEWRITER.

GEORGE: Yes, sir.

JACK: AND JOSEFSBERG, YOUR PENCIL..LOOK AT THAT POINT.

MILT: That's my head, sir.

JACK: I mean the one with the eraser on it...And Tackaberry...Where's Howard?

TACK: He went A.W.O.L. to Red Skelton, sir.

JACK: He did, eh?...NOW LISTEN, MEN, THIS IS NO PICNIC, YOU KNOW...YOU GOT A JOB TO DO AND I'M GONNA SEE THAT YOU DO IT...AND YOU...LOOK AT <u>YOU</u> WITH YOUR HAIR HANGING DOWN IN YOUR FACE..I NEVER HAD THAT TROUBLE WITH BILL MORROW.

TACK: But sir, wasn't he bald?

JACK: That's beside the point.

MILT: That's my head, sir.

JACK: DON'T GET SMART...I HAD ANOTHER WRITER WITH ME FOR EIGHT YEARS...EDDIE BELOIN...DO YOU KNOW WHERE HE IS NOW?

GEORGE: In a sanitarium, sir?

JACK: Now cut that out, Balzer. ALL RIGHT, MEN, GO DOWNSTAIRS AND START WRITING NEXT WEEK'S PROGRAM.

GEORGE:
MILT: Yes, sir.
TACK:

JACK: ABOUT...FACE! FORWARD...MARCH!

(SOUND: MARCHING FOOTSTEPS)

JACK: HEY, LOOK OUT FOR THAT WINDOW!

(SOUND: TERRIFIC GLASS CRASH, THEN SOUND OF BODIES FALLING AND LANDING SEVERAL FLOORS BELOW. AFTER A PAUSE, DISTANT MARCHING FOOTSTEPS START AGAIN AND FADE OUT)

JACK: Well, I guess they're all right, darn it... Oh boy, thirty-five weeks of this.

The lines were short, but they were long enough to reach from coast to coast. Thankfully, the show played well and ended with Jack again leaning into the microphone to say, "We're a little late, goodnight, folks."

At the end of the broadcast, I couldn't tell you how I stood as an actor, but as a writer, I was sure of this -- we were now two down with thirty-three to go.

CHAPTER IV

Monday was get-away day. We were going home. I awakened early and packed my bags. In the afternoon, in settlement for our food and lodging Tack and I paid our hotel bill and Milt kissed his mother. At 5 P.M., aboard The Twentieth Century Limited, we pulled out of Grand Central Station. We were on our way back to California.

Later that evening, the three of us were in the Dining Car having dinner. Due to war-time travelling conditions, we had a long wait and by the time we got served, we were really hungry. Jack and Mark walked into the diner and when Mary saw how frantically we were devouring our steaks, she said to Jack, "Look at your writers. They're eating as if the Japanese were on the roof."

That night, while being rocked to sleep by the motion of the train as it sped westward, I kept turning over in my mind the events of the past few weeks -- the people I had met -- the places

I had gone -- the things I did. I also thought about something I didn't do. I was in New York almost three weeks and not once did I attend a performance in a legitimate theatre. And yet, though I had no way of knowing it then, just two short years later, I had my own show on Broadway.

On the train trip west, I was even more excited than on the trip east, which is only natural when you consider I was going home to my one and three-quarter family. At 8:30 A.M., Thursday morning, the Santa Fe Chief glided into the Pasadena Station. Pasadena was a point of disembarkation for Hollywood celebrities. Here there were no crowds and chauffeurs could park the Cadillac limousines close by.

When I got off the train, my chauffeur was there, too, in a 1940 Buick Convertible with a rip in the top, which meant, since it was a typical California day, I could immediately start regaining the tan I had lost in New York. I told Ada Marie I would drive when I noticed she and what's-its-name were having difficulty getting under the wheel. Since we had written most of the up-coming show on the train, the writers were able to take the day off for unpacking, laundry and other things they had gotten behind on.

The next morning the writers and Jane, with her poised pencil and notebook, converged on the front porch of the Benny's luxurious home on Roxbury Drive in Beverly Hills. We rang the chimes and were soon greeted by the Butler -- not Rochester -- a real butler. We were escorted into the library where we were soon joined by Jack. The morning was spent changing and polishing the material we had written on the train.

After a lunch of delicious sandwiches and coffee, (contrary to Jack's radio character, there was no charge) we spent the afternoon writing the last scene. On Sunday evening, from the N.B.C. Studios in Hollywood we broadcast another show that carried the Benny trademark -- running gags and routines based on actual happenings -- in this case, the train ride home from New York, and a sketch on Algiers, reflecting the North African trip.

On the fourth show of the season, Sam Perrin joined the writing staff. Sam and I had previously written together for two years and from this time on we remained partners for over thirty years. In a very short time, Jack's confidence in his staff increased and the hours working directly with him decreased. We soon had a set working routine. Monday off -- Tuesday set the premise with Jack -- then Sam and I would split the show with Josefsberg and Tackaberry and on Wednesday and Thursday each team would write their half. We kept in touch by phone to insure a perfect blend and to sustain continuity. On Fridays we would go to the Benny home in Beverly Hills. The butler would let us in and when the script was fixed and polished, Jack would let us out. Weekends, as always, were rehearsals and broadcast.

In mid-November we did our first broadcast from Palm Springs. In 1943 Palm Springs was a beautiful desert resort village and a mecca for Hollywood celebrities. Its attraction was the sun and the air accompanied by equal parts of sand, wind, peace and quiet. At the busiest intersection there could have been a traffic light with all four ways turned to green and you would never have seen

an accident. This desert spa had only one golf course and it was bordered by a 700 square mile trap. It was only nine holes so you played it twice -- or only once if you wanted a respectable score.

Even though this jewel of the desert was only a hundred miles from our home, my wife and I had never been there before. We drove down on Monday and checked into the luxurious Lone Palm Hotel. During the next four days, the writers wrote the script sitting in the sun around a crystal-clear Olympic-size swimming pool. It was a tough life, but when you're just getting started in this business, you've got to make sacrifices.

During the ensuing weeks, we did shows from military bases within a hundred mile radius of Hollywood. This travel restriction was necessary because Jack was under contract to star in a picture for Warner Brothers and they were preparing to start shooting in January. Shortly after the first of the year, Cy Howard decided he wanted to leave the Benny writing staff. If I remember correctly, he was offered a part in a play, so Jack gave him his release. From that time on for the next eight years, the Benny writers remained Sam Perrin, George Balzer, Milt Josefsberg and John Tackaberry.

During the filming of the picture, which by the way was "The Horn Blows at Midnight", the writers would meet with Jack at Warner Brothers Studios in the San Fernando Valley. This arrangement worked out well because we lived in the valley. Also it gave me an opportunity to see what a motion picture studio was like on the inside. For me this was another first.

And speaking of firsts,while the Warner Brothers were producing Jack's picture, my wife, on January 24th, 1944, gave birth to a baby girl. We titled our production 'Bonnie Jean'. Time proved that my wife was a better producer than the Warner Brothers. "The Horn Blows at Midnight" had a very short run, but Bonnie Jean is still going strong. In fact, she has even done some producing herself. His name is Sean.

Although "The Horn Blows at Midnight" was a flop at the box office, it was a big success in another department. The picture was a great source of comedy for the radio programs and later on the television shows. Mary Livingstone best summed up the picture's failure when she said, "The Horn Blows at Midnight, and the audience blew at 10:30."

During the shooting of the picture, Jimmy Starr, a Hollywood columnist, asked Jack to be a guest writer of his movie column which appeared daily in a Los Angeles paper and was also syndicated throughout the country. Jack, of course, accepted and then asked Sam and me if we would write it for him. Of course, he knew we didn't have to say "yes" and he also knew that at our salaries, we wouldn't dare say "no".

We needed a little gimmick so we patterned it after a column written in those days by Eleanor Roosevelt called "My Day". We wrote about Jack's day -- from the time he got up in the morning, drove to the studio, his troubles getting past the guard and his hours in make-up. We told about his problems of filming and then took him back home. It was all done in a humorous fashion

and was fun to write. It appeared in newspapers all over the country and was well-received -- or so we were told. I mention the above assignment merely to illustrate how staff writers are subject to working on anything the STAR might need.

In April, with the picture finished but not forgotten, the Benny Show was invited to Vancouver, Canada, to open the Canadian War Bond Drive. Instead of going directly to British Columbia, we worked our way north, playing military bases. Our first stop was an Army Air Field near Stockton, California. Bob Hope's brother, George, was stationed there as a Sergeant and he was our guest on the show. We used him as a springboard to do our version of Bob's show. In the sketch the phone rang and Jack, playing the part of Bob Hope, answered it with: "Hello, this is Bob Hope speaking." Rochester was on the other end and when he heard Jack say that, he countered with: "Who?" Jack then repeated, "Bob Hope." Roch again said, "Who?" Jack, still playing the part, replied: "Bob Hope". Rochester then came back with, "Oh, boss, why don't we just settle down with what we've got and do the best we can."

Soon after the broadcast was over, the whole troupe -- about thirty people -- boarded the train in Stockton and we were on our way north to Seattle. An hour or so out, the conductor entered our car and started asking for tickets. We directed him to Burt Scott who always took care of such matters. That is -- always except today. Today, he didn't have the tickets, either. It seems that when Burt left the hotel, his briefcase with the tickets inside was still sitting in the lobby. The ticket problem was solved when the Army agreed to pick up Burt's briefcase and fly it

to Seattle. Of course, we didn't let Burt forget the incident for one minute and I guess we were getting a little out of hand when we were told to stop picking on "little ol' Mr. Scott". This order to desist came from Henrietta, Mary's maid, and we knew she meant it.

Henrietta was a large, buxom black woman. She had worked for the Benny's for many years and was a beautiful person. She had a way of expressing herself that was priceless. For instance, I recall a time when Jack and the writers were working on a script at the Benny home in the library and Mary sent Henrietta in to get her something to read. The magazines were next to a chair where John Tackaberry was sitting. In order to get a magazine off the bottom shelf, it was necessary for Henrietta to stoop way over. While she held this position, looking through the magazines, Tack became entranced with the rather large target that loomed up beside him and, unable to restrain himself, he took his script and lightly touched what, for reading purposes we'll call the "bull's eye."

At this point, Henrietta straightened up, somewhat involuntarily, and standing there at her full height, looked down at John and said, "Mr. Tackaberry, you do that again and you're gonna need only <u>one</u> more white shirt."

Hearing this, the rest of us roared with laughter. As Henrietta strode from the room, she had a twinkle in her eye which told me she knew she had just gotten a laugh which was as big as any the nation's top comedian ever had.

Late that evening we arrived in Seattle. Burt picked up the lost tickets and we proceeded north on into Vancouver, B.C. Incidentally, Vancouver is the true birthplace of Mary Livingstone, even though we say on the program she was born in Plainfield, New Jersey, and that Mama and Papa still live there. Though we arrived close to midnight, we were greeted by a bagpipe band which escorted us off the train, through the station and out onto the street where official cars were waiting to take us to the New Vancouver Hotel. We were also greeted by an individual who, in a very confidential manner, informed each of us if we wanted something to eat, there was great food at a place close to the hotel called Oscar's. After we checked into the hotel, some of us were hungry so, taking the suggestion of the man at the railroad station, went to Oscar's. We walked in and you-know-who greeted us at the door. The same fellow -- he was Oscar. Every country has its shills -- but for doughnuts?

During the next several days, Jack, Mary and the members of the cast visited Canadian Military Hospitals and entertained the patients. Meanwhile, we writers were holed up in our hotel rooms preparing the script for Sunday's broadcast. It turned out this was one show we knew was "on ice" before it hit the airlanes. We did the broadcast from a hockey rink. Shortly after the ticket-holders filed in and seated themselves on the folding chairs, we went on the air and the show was enthusiastically received. For this we were very grateful. It's not easy to get a hot audience with cold feet. I don't know if their applause was sincere or if

they were just trying to keep warm. The radio program, coupled with a two-hour stage show that evening, served to officially open the Canadian War Bond Drive.

The next morning with the gratitude of Canadian Government Officials ringing in his ear, Jack Benny herded his whole gang aboard ship and we set sail for an overnight visit in Victoria. Victoria is located on an island and is absolutely beautiful. We arrived about two-thirty in the afternoon and at four o'clock we were having tea in the lobby of The Empress Hotel. We sat there holding our tea cups with extended pinkies while a waitress passed out crumpets. One of our group, terribly impressed with the Old World atmosphere, commented, "Gee, this is just like England." Hearing this utterance come from an apparently uneducated American, the waitress straightened up and quickly announced to one and all, "This is England." Then throwing back her shoulders and with her crumpets sticking straight out, she floated out of the room. If she had been walking on her English pride, she would have been tall enough to be bronzed and placed in Trafalgar Square.

Late Tuesday afternoon we again boarded ship. Leaving a wake that trailed off into a setting sun, we soon glided through the merging waters of the Straits of Georgia and Juan de Fuca. Or to say it less romantically, "We went to Seattle."

After checking into the Olympic Hotel, a few of us found a Seafood house, had dinner and checked out the town. Returning to the hotel around 2 A.M.,I picked up my key and saw my room for

the first time. It was very evident that after the last occupant checked out the bed had not been changed. I was exhausted, but by condensing my energy into one finger, I had strength enough to dial the front desk. Voicing my complaint, I was informed the housekeeper was off duty. After hanging up the phone, I stood there, looking at the used bed, and knew I at least had a choice. I could sleep standing up or I could crawl in. Since Seattle was a Navy town and a point of Embarkation, the odds were a hundred to one the previous body to sleep in my bed belonged to a sailor who by now could be in the bowels of a submarine, bound for Guadalcanal. If so, the least I could do was to minimize my fuss about sharing his sheets. So, without further ado, I slipped into bed with limp muscles and a patriotic heart.

In the days that followed, the routine was unchanged. Jack, Mary and the cast made the rounds of hospitals while the writers worked on the script. Sunday's broadcast came from Bremerton Naval Station. Dick Haymes was the guest singer, substituting for Dennis Day. Dennis left the show one week earlier to be inducted into the Navy, where he served for two years as an Officer using his real name, Eugene Patrick McNulty.

The following week we were flown to the Naval Air Station on Whidbey Island. It was very close to Seattle so the plane no more got up then it had to come down. I knew exactly how the Wright Brothers must have felt. It was also my first ride in an airplane. Stepping off the plane, I thought to myself -- Orville, Wilbur and George.

We moved on to Portland, Oregon, and did a broadcast from Camp Adair, an army base located in Corvallis. This was our last show of a five-week road trip and arrangements were made for the Army to fly Jack and the other members of the cast back to Los Angeles. After the sign-off, we all drove to the airport where a military plane was waiting. My partner Sam, his wife, Peggy, Mary Livingstone and myself not wishing to fly, would leave by train the next morning.

As Jack, Don, Phil, Rochester and members of the cast and crew got into the military plane, I happened to notice a little screw lying on the floor of the aircraft. I picked it up and showing it to Jack said, "Jack, does this mean anything?" Everyone laughed and continued taking their places on the bucket seats positioned against side walls of the plane. Amidst waving from those who stayed behind, the plane took off and headed south. Sam, Peggy, Mary and I started the seventy-mile auto trip back to Portland.

When we arrived at the Benson Hotel, there was a message that Mr. Benny had called and left a number. Mary returned the call and Jack, who was now at a hotel in Corvallis, told her the story of what had happened.

Shortly after taking off, the plane ran into extremely bad weather and was so violently bounced around, the pilot decided to return to Corvallis, that is-- if he could. For several moments it was questionable if the plane was going anywhere except down. Fortunately, the pilot was able to right the craft and get it headed back toward the base where it landed safely.

This very dangerous situation was not without its humorous overtones. After the plane landed, Phil Harris, pointing to his hand that was still tightly clenched around a 3/8 inch rod that ran the length of the plane, said, "Fellows, I don't know how scared any of you were, but when I grabbed hold of this rod, it was four inches thick." Then stepping off the plane said, "Take me to a one-story hotel."

Later Jack said to me, "George, when you showed me that loose screw in the plane, I should have used that as an excuse to cancel our flight."

We arrived back in Hollywood with two shows remaining on the schedule. These were broadcasts from N.B.C. Studios on the corner of Sunset Boulevard and Vine Street. During the week of writing and rehearsing for the final show, I had time to mentally review my first complete season on the show. Needless to say, I learned a lot. Because the Jack Benny Show went on the air at seven o'clock Sunday evening in the east, we actually did the show at four o'clock in the afternoon on the Pacific Coast. This, of course, because of the three hour difference in time. Later, a recording would be released at seven o'clock for the western part of the country. This gave us a chance to hear the repeat show in the quiet of our homes. With this arrangement, I became aware of a psychological aspect. If we left the studio feeling the show we had just finished was a little disappointing, that it didn't play as well as we expected, when we later heard it at home, it was always better than we thought. Conversely, if we left the studio thinking the broadcast was absolutely sensational, when we heard it at home, it wasn't quite that good.

I also learned that the ego of people in radio -- writers and performers -- made them believe that when their program was on the air, the world stopped turning and people everywhere in absolute silence focused their attention on what was coming out of their radios. This, I discovered, is not so. At my own house we would listen to the West Coast Benny broadcast while having dinner and more than once, at the precise moment one of my gems, my most precious comedy punch lines, was being delivered, a member of my own family would cover it with a brilliant, "Pass the mashed potatoes," and then during the studio audience laughter, dip into the gravy bowl without even the decency to ask, "What did he say?"

I also learned that each family was primarily interested in that element of the show in which their father, husband or brother was involved. For example, when Mahlon Merrick, the musical arranger and conductor, would go home after the show, his wife, Jean, would say, "Honey, the music today was absolutely beautiful." When George Foster, the audio engineer, would go home,his wife, Tillie, would greet him with, "Sweetie, the sound was perfect, every word was so clear." Don Wilson, the announcer, would arrive home to be met by his wife, Lois, saying, "Donald, your enunciation and diction during the commercial was marvelous." Then I, a writer, would go home and as I quietly let myself in, my wife would say, "Where have you been?" I would answer, "I've been down at the show." This reply would be greeted with, "What show?" followed by a bawling out for being away all day. Now, of course,

this part about my wife's reaction isn't true. I just thought I'd toss it in for what it was worth. (Later, when my wife typed this, she told me it isn't worth much.)

During that first season, we writers took advantage of all the built-in features of the show, including the Maxwell, the violin and the famous Fred Allen-Jack Benny feud.

For those who don't remember, the Benny-Allen feud started innocently enough in the late thirties. On one of Fred's radio shows he had as a guest a young boy, eight or ten years of age, who played the violin. On that particular night the young musician gave a marvelous rendition of "The Bee". In fact, he played it so beautifully, Fred was prompted to ad lib, "If Jack Benny calls himself a violinist, he should be ashamed of himself."

Jack, a great fan of Fred's, heard the remark and on the next Sunday's broadcast, answered it with a comment or two of his own. Fred, of course, didn't let it go at that end and on his next show responded. Before long, the Benny-Allen feud was sweeping the country. As the weeks went by, the personal jibes got broader and broader. Jack's remarks often appraised Fred's appearance, such as: "With those bags under his eyes, Fred Allen looks like a short butcher peeping over two pounds of liver." Or, "With those wrinkles, he looks like a convertible with the top half way down." Fred would always counter with stinging remarks of his own. "Jack Benny isn't cheap. It's just that he has short arms and carries his money low in his pockets."

Then there was the time Jack was invited back to his home town of Waukegan, Illinois. On Sunday he did the radio show from the local auditorium and on Monday the Mayor, the Chamber of Commerce and the visiting celebrities gathered in the town square. Amid much pomp and ceremony they planted a tree in Jack's honor. Jack then returned to the West Coast and a few days later the tree died. No one could figure out why, except Fred Allen. Fred said, "How in the hell can a tree live in Waukegan when the sap is in Hollywood?" The feud was all in fun and much to the listening delight of the combined Benny-Allen fans.

On June 4th we did the last show of the 1943-44 season. Summing it up, it was a good year. We did shows for military personnel who were confined to hospitals and did Sunday broadcasts from the following bases: Marine Air Station, Mojave; Marine Air Base, El Toro; Army Air Field, Muroc; Terminal Island Navy Base; March Air Field, Riverside; Army Air Field, Lemoore; Naval Air Station, Livermore, Calif.; Army Air Field, Stockton; Bremerton Navy Yard, Washington; Whidbey Island, Washington; and Camp Adair at Corvallis, Oregon. Among the guest stars, we had Barbara Stanwyck, Alexis Smith, Raul Walsh - director of "The Horn Blows at Midnight", Mark Hellinger, Larry Adler, Groucho Marx, Louella Parsons, Basil Rathbone, Dick Haymes and Danny Kaye.

When the last broadcast was finished, it was a happy moment. The writers would be off for seventeen weeks and Jack

would be off for the South Pacific where he would again spend his summer with a U.S.O. Troupe, entertaining the American Armed Forces.

CHAPTER V

In July of 1944 Myrt Blum, Jack Benny's business manager, called my home and asked me to meet him in his office in Beverly Hills. I knew the subject of the meeting would be my new writing contract -- that is, if there was to be a new contract. In a business where a thirteen-week association was considered to be good and you'd been retained for thirty-five, one still couldn't be sure. When I arrived at Mr. Blum's office, I was announced by his secretary who then proceeded to usher me into the inner sanctum. After an exchange of greeting, Mr. Blum informed me that Mr. Benny would like to have me on his writing staff again for the upcoming radio season. He then pushed a contract in front of me and asked me to look it over.

As I sat there reading, I made a great effort to conceal any reaction to the terms. The new contract called for a full season, not the usual short option periods. Also it contained a very substantial increase in salary. I finished reading and,

still hiding my pleasure, casually placed the contract back on his desk. I'm sure my unemotional attitude completely fooled Mr. Blum. However, I think he might have suspected something when he handed me a pen and pointed to the dotted line. I signed so fast, I wrote half my name on his finger. There was even room on his hang nail for my middle initial.

On October 1, 1944, we did the opening broadcast of the new season -- a season in which there would be two major changes. First, with Dennis Day in the Navy we had to find a replacement. Second, we changed sponsors. General Foods, the makers of Grape Nuts and Grape Nuts Flakes would no longer be with us.

At the close of the last season, Jack's contract with General Foods had expired and Mr. George Washington Hill, head of The American Tobacco Company, made a bid for the show and got it. At first the product was to be Pall-Mall Cigarettes. During the summer we had a few meetings in which we actually worked on an opening and commercials for Pall-Mall. Suddenly word came that Mr. Hill had changed his mind. He wanted The Jack Benny Show to be the flagship of his number one product, Lucky Strike Cigarettes.

This change of sponsors reminds me of an interesting side-light. George Washington Hill was a man who ran the American Tobacco Company with an iron fist and had a reputation of getting involved in all programs sponsored by any of his products. If there was anything he didn't like, it was changed. By the way of illustration, the Lucky Strike Hit Parade was also one of Mr. Hill's programs. It was a show with an orchestra and singers doing the hit songs of the week. The previous season Mr. Hill

was in the control room when the program went on the air for its opening show. At the end of the broadcast, Mr. Hill stood up and shouted to the Producer, "Fire the orchestra!" The Producer explained how that would be impossible. There were twenty-six musicians under contract for thirteen weeks at large salaries. Mr. Hill still insisted that they be fired. When the Producer asked, "Why?" Mr. Hill informed him, "Because they play music my wife and I can't dance to." The order was carried out and the second show was done with a new leader and new musicians. Whether or not Mr. and Mrs. Hill came to the studio every week and danced in the control room, I don't know.

This true story was known to Jack and, not having signed a contract yet, he was apprehensive about having a sponsor who might inject himself into the script content of the show. Jack was also aware that Lucky Strike did commercials that were raucous attention getters and he didn't particularly care for this kind of product selling. Now, Mr. Hill, aware of Jack's feelings, became apprehensive; and being a resourceful businessman, he sent word to Jack that he would stay out of the program if Jack would stay out of the commercials. Shortly after that, the contracts were signed.

Jack Benny and George Washington Hill had never met one another and did not meet until almost two years later. Even then, it was not a business meeting, but only a friendly luncheon. After that the two men never met again, even though Lucky Strike remained the Jack Benny sponsor for fifteen years. I think this

physical separation was planned. Otherwise, Jack might have wound up as Mr. Hill's dancing partner.

The opening show got underway with the chant of the tobacco auctioneer done by L.A. Speed Riggs of Goldsboro, North Carolina and F. E. Boone of Lexington, Kentucky. The sell lines in this one-minute commercial were done by three announcers and a sound man, using a telegraph key to punctuate the LS/MFT - LS/MFT Lucky Strike Means fine tobacco. The commercial finished with more chanting from the tobacco auctioneers.

An interesting point very few people realized was, in the beginning, the opening and closing commercials were all done live and came from New York City. The network would then switch over to Hollywood, or wherever we might be, to pick up the program. Even later, when the commercial people moved to Hollywood, they still worked out of a separate studio.

On the first show, following the policy of doing programs based on reality, we covered the subject of Jack's return to the air, after a summer overseas -- plus the problem of replacing Dennis, and the introduction of a new sponsor. Script-wise, it was handled in the following manner:

We opened the show with Rochester alone in the Benny kitchen preparing breakfast for "the Boss" who was still asleep. His efforts were interrupted by a knock at the back door. With a verbal "Coming", Roch stepped to the door and opened it.

"Oh, it's you, Mr. Milkman."

"Good mornin', Rochester...I see by this note you left, you want me to start deliverin' milk again and stop leavin' cream."

"Yeah, Mr. Benny's back!"

"Oh yes, yes, he's been overseas, hasn't he?"

"That's right."

"Say, Rochester, is it true that Mr. Benny's program will no longer be sponsored by Grape Nuts and Grape Nuts Flakes?"

"Yes, sir..From now on, he's gonna be with LS...MFT."

"You mean Lucky Strike means fine tobacco?"

The milkman's question gave Rochester a chance to repeat: "Yes, Lucky Strike means fine tobacco... fine, fine, FINE!"

"Well...tell Mr. Benny I'll be listenin' to him..Goodbye."

"Goodbye."

Before leaving, the milkman, thinking of some unfinished business,said, "Oh, by the way, there's a little matter of last month's bill..And here it is."

Rochester took the bill and reacted as he read the details.

"Mmmmm Mmmmmm...Twenty-eight dollars for cream...Okay..I'll write you out a check."

He then reached into his pocket and brought out two ivory cubes.

"Wait a minute..Is that a pair of dice you took out of your pocket?"

"Let's just call it my Central Avenue fountain pen...Mr. Milkman, lay that bill down on the ground."

The hand holding the dice began to shake and the milkman protested:

"But Rochester, I don't want --"

"It's too late now, I'm wound up!"

"Oh, all right."

"HERE GOES!"

The shaking continued for a moment, then Roch's palm opened, the cubes danced on the ground, then came to a halt with the numbers favoring their master, causing Roch to announce: "There it is in black and white!"

The milkman accepted the results with, "Doggone, I've been homogenized again."

Rochester then tore up the bill with a fitting farewell: "Goodbye, and better luck next month."

Shortly after Roch's return to the kitchen, Jack Benny, the star, made his entrance.

"Oh good morning, boss..Sit right down and have your breakfast."

"Thanks, Rochester. Gee, it's good to be home."

"It's good to have you home, boss..You'll never know how much I missed you."

"Did you, Rochester?"

"Yeah..the three months you were away, this old house was so lonesome..I'd go into the living room and see your big easy chair settin' there with no one in it, and I'd feel like cryin'."

"Gee!"

"The trees outside were in bloom, but they looked barren to me."

"Aw, Rochester."

"The birds were singing, but I never could seem to hear them. The sun was shining, but I never saw it."

"Really, Rochester?"

"Yeah...I NEVER GOT UP TILL EIGHT O'CLOCK AT NIGHT!"

The beauty of the build-up was abruptly destroyed by the confession of the punchline. Jack quickly ordered Rochester to cut out the nonsense and get him something to eat.

A moment or two later, Mary Livingstone arrived at the house and she and Jack immediately got into a discussion about who was going to replace Dennis Day. Jack then told Mary he was thinking of getting Bing Crosby. Mary told Jack he wouldn't get Crosby for thirty-five dollars a week.

Hearing this, Rochester, chimed in with, "You ain't gonna get him for what you're thinking, either."

A little later, Phil Harris entered and did a routine about how he spent the summer replacing Kay Kyser. Kay Kyser, an orchestra leader, had a program called The Kollege of Musical Knowledge and Phil played the part of The Professor for thirteen weeks.

Don Wilson did the middle integrated commercial about "Lucky Strike being so round, so firm, so fully packed." This was followed by the final scene which took place in the office

of the sponsors where we discovered Fred Allen, the guest star, already trying to get Jack's job. In just thirty minutes it was all over. Happily, the morning reviews told us that once again, "The Jack Benny Show was off and running."

Through the first five programs, the search to find a replacement for Dennis was kept alive; not necessarily the major subject matter, but it was injected into each script. The second season with the new writers proved to be a year of several innovations. In the second show Frank Sinatra was our guest star and at the time Frank was the star "The Hit Parade." He did his weekly Saturday evening show from New York City, making it necessary for his appearance on our show to be done by remote. For the writers, this presented no problems. We merely scripted the Benny gang to be at Jack's house on a Saturday night and by a simple story device of turning on a dial, we were able to work Sinatra's song into the program.

When Frank finished singing, Jack got very excited about the possibility of hiring him for his singer and wanted to talk to him immediately. This, of course, meant making a long distance phone call to New York. Since this was before direct dialing, Jack had to go through the operator. After three short dials, he heard a female voice say:

"Long distance."

"Oh, operator, I want to speak to New York... I'd like to get Frank Sinatra."

"So would I, kiddo."

"Look, Miss, will you please ring Mr. Sinatra for me? Person to person -- he's on The Hit Parade in New York."

"Just a moment -- I'll try the New York Circuit. Los Angeles calling New York -- Los Angeles calling New York."

After a moment she was able to raise the New York Operator who answered with, "Hello, Los Angeles, this is New York. How are you, Los Angeles?"

"Fine,thanks..and how are you, New York?"

"Oh, I'm feeling grand, but Brooklyn's got the mumps."

Jack, somewhat perturbed at this personal gossip, cut in, "Look, operators, I don't care if San Francisco's got water under her bridge, I want to speak to Frank Sinatra."

"All right, all right, keep your shirt on. I haven't talked to New York since she had a baby."

"Well, congratulations and get me my number."

"I'm sorry, the line is busy..we'll call you back when it's clear."

Eventually, Jack got to talk with Sinatra and the two of them did an appropriate routine. This, along with his singing, made for a very successful guest appearance. However, there was another high-light which made all concerned very happy. It was the spot done by the two telephone operators. The two characters,

with voices that had Brooklynese intonations, were played by Sara Berner and Bea Benedaret. By their audience acceptance the writers and Jack immediately knew we would be using them frequently. To facilitate this, we took them both out of long distance and put them on the mythical switchboard at N.B.C. Studios and gave them names to match their characters -- Mable Flapsaddle and Gertrude Gearshift.

During the remaining ten golden years of radio, Mable and Gertrude played the operators many, many times. With the passage of time their characters and jokes got broader and broader. Once when Jack asked Mable what kind of perfume she was wearing, she told him it was something new called Transportation.

"Transportation! Why would a perfume be called Transportation?"

"It's condensation of steam that's been forced through a Motorman's glove."

I remember we once had a line that described Mable and Gertrude almost perfectly, but wouldn't use it because it smacked of bad taste. The line in question was, "They are the only two girls who can step out of a swimming pool and smell of perspiration." In 1944 the line was not used because it was too rough. Today it probably wouldn't be used because it isn't rough enough.

On the sixth week, the search to find a new singer came to an end with the discovery of a young man named Larry Stevens. Once again, using the Benny format of writing about reality, we did a program based on Jack finding Larry. On radio, at the time, there was a very popular show starring a man named Dunninger.

Dunninger's claim to fame was that he could read minds -- tell you not only the past but could delve into the future. On the Dunninger radio program, people would appear before him with all sorts of troubles and Dunninger, through his psychic powers, would give them advice and solve their problems.

It just happened that Dunninger was on the west coast doing his radio show and also making a two-week personal appearance at the Shrine Auditorium in Los Angeles. We found out he was available and asked him to be our guest star.

In our script, we had Jack take Mary to the Shrine Auditorium to see Dunninger for an evening's entertainment. As the two of them sat there watching this man do his mind reading act, Jack in his asides to Mary was very skeptical. Dunninger read the minds of several people and Jack continued his whispered degrading comments to Mary, when suddenly Dunninger said:

"And now, I have thought waves coming to me from a man in the fourth row..I get the name of Bennett..or Benny..Jack Benny."

Mary, nudging Jack with an urging whisper, "Jack, that's you..stand up."

Jack, embarrassed at this turn of events, "Oh, I don't wanna, everybody'll look at me."

Mr. Dunninger persisted, "Mr. Benny, please cooperate..Stand up."

"Yes, Mr. Dillinger..or Dunninger..Darn that Phil Harris."

"Mr. Benny, a thought comes to me that two weeks ago you lost a dollar bill."

"Yes, yes sir, I did."

Dunninger continued,"The serial number on that dollar bill was K 155134...Wait a minute, I don't seem to get the last three numbers."

Jack, without the slightest hesitation, "Five one eight..That's what it was."

Dunninger, surprised, asked, "Jack, how did you know?"

And Mary quickly added, "What do you think he reads at night?"

After Jack shushed Mary, Dunninger zeroed in: "Now Mr. Benny, you have another problem. You are looking for a singer..Is that correct?"

"Yes sir..and I have looked everywhere."

"Well, Mr. Benny, I think I can help you."

"Really?"

"Let me concentrate...I see...I see a gas station..It's on the corner of Third and L-A-C-I-E-N-E-G-A."

"Third and La Cienega?"

"Mr. Benny, if you'll go to that gas station.. you will be waited on by a young man with red hair.. I get the name of..Stevens...Larry Stevens."

"Larry Stevens?"

"Yes..This boy has never sung professionally.. He has been working in this gas station for several months, since he was honorably discharged from the Army Air Force."

"Gee!"

"He is twenty-one years old..Weighs a hundred and sixty-five pounds..and is a graduate of Fairfax High School in Hollywood."

"Larry Stevens, eh?"

"He has a very nice voice and sings all the time..even while he's working."

"He does?"

"Yes..Now Mr. Benny, the thought is fading away, and that's about all I can tell you."

"Well, thank you very much, Mr. Dunninger."

As our broadcast continued, our script had Mary drive Jack to the gas station on the corner of Third and LaCienega, and sure enough, the attendant was a young man with red hair and while he pumped gas into Mary's car, he sang. Jack had to admit that Dunninger was right. This kid did have a beautiful voice and his name was Larry Stevens. Jack asked Larry if he'd like to be on his radio program. Larry said he would and everything was settled. Weelll...not quite everything...We didn't have Larry agree on a salary because we knew with Jack's cheap character this little item would be good for at least another four or five shows.

The reason we used a gas station location for finding Larry was because that's where he really worked.

Incidentally, in the scene at the Shrine Autidorium, did you notice in Dunninger's line,"It's on the corner of Third and La Cienega", he spelled out L-A C-I-E-N-E-G-A? The reason for this was in rehearsal he couldn't pronounce La Cienega. This struck me as being very funny. I mean, if a man can really read minds, look into the future and solve big problems, shouldn't there be something in his psyche to tell him how to pronounce a word?

On a morning several weeks later, having finished the rough draft of a script, Sam, Milt, Tack and myself, along with the script girl, arrived at the front door of the Benny home. Again we were ushered in, but this time before we could step into the library, Jack, still in pajamas and robe, stood at the top of the spiral staircase and silently signaled us to come up. As we approached, he placed a finger over his pursed lips and whispered, "Shhhh..Mary's still sleeping." For a quick moment I realized that in their own homes big important stars are not allowed to shine, but merely twinkle -- and then only if they twinkle quietly.

After tip-toeing down the hall to Jack's room, he closed the door and explained he had a little cold and wanted to stay in. He then propped himself up in bed, pulled up the covers and started reading a copy of our script. As Jack read, we sat silently -- waiting. After reading about three pages, the bedroom door, untouched, opened. Without perceptibly looking up and continuing to

read, Jack threw back the covers, got out of bed, stepped over to the door and closed it. Still reading, he returned to the bed, got back in and again pulled the covers around him..never once taking his eyes off the script. He read on for another three pages or so and once again the bedroom door opened. Without looking up, still reading, Jack threw back the covers, got out of bed, walked to the door and closed it. Eyes still glued to the script, he returned to his bed, got in and pulled up the covers. Three pages later, the door opened and a third time Jack, continuing to read, went through the same routine, covers off -- out of bed -- walk to door -- close it -- back to bed -- eyes still on script.

At this point I got up out of my chair, walked over to the door, quietly opened it, and using a coin for a screw driver, I removed the strike plate. With my pen knife, I cut a little sliver of wood from the door frame, replaced the strike plate -- moving it over just a trifle, and closed the door. I then returned to my chair. All the while, Jack kept reading.

A moment later, as if on cue, he stole a glance at the door which didn't open. He read on and again he looked toward the door. It still hadn't opened. Almost in disappointment, he looked at me and said, "George, what in the hell did you do?"

I explained what I did and why the door would now stay shut. He looked at me in utter disbelief and said, "I'll be a sonovabitch. I paid over three hundred thousand dollars for this house and for six years I've been getting out of bed every four minutes to close that door."

Hearing this, I said, "Jack, you could have had your butler or your handyman fix it."

He replied, "I suppose so, but I just didn't want to bother anybody."

As the years went by, I realized how much that phrase "I didn't want to bother anybody" was the key to the true character of this gentle man.

Jack's lack of mechanical know-how served us well as a facet of his radio character. For example, I remember how the writers called upon it when writing a routine about Jack and Rochester fixing a flat tire.

"How much longer before you'll have the spare on, Rochester?"

"Just a couple of minutes."

"Couple of minutes..It would have been fixed long ago if I'd done it myself."

"Hand me the wrench, will you, boss?"

"Okay...here."

"That's the screwdriver."

"Oh, the wrench..Here."

"That's the pump."

"Oh...Here."

"That's the hub cap!"

"Oh, you want the wrench...Here."

"You're back to the screwdriver again!"

"Oh - yes."

"You know, boss, you sure ain't mechanically minded."

"I am, too."

"Then why do you call me every morning to screw the cap back on your toothpaste?"

"Look, just hurry with the tire."

"I'm almost finished."

"Good..you know, Rochester, I just can't understand having a blow-out...It's a very good tire..It's a General."

"I know..but you've run that General down to a buck private!

"Stop being silly..that tire hasn't got so many holes in it."

"It hasn't, boss! The inner tube could be arrested for indecent exposure!"

"What?"

"Even the wheel is ashamed to go around with it!"

"Rochester, that's a terrible..terrible joke."

"Hee hee hee."

"What are you laughing at?"

"You always say that, and two weeks later it shows up on your program."

"Never mind..now let's get to the studio."

CHAPTER VI

On Monday, January 8, 1945, of the '44'45 season we started an extended road trip which took the show to New York, Chicago, St. Joseph, Missouri, and Denver, Colorado. The show from New York was to open the March of Dimes Infantile Paralysis Drive. For the broadcast of January 7 radio listeners heard a show evolving around preparing for the trip and the departure. In the opening scene, Jack was at home packing and happily singing:

"East side, West side..All around the town..
La la la la la ...Oh boy, New York! Bright lights...
Broadway..There's so much excitement in New York...
subways, taxicabs, people rushing around..And that's
where you see all the old vaudeville acts..Powers
Elephants, Sharkey the trained seal, Finks Mules,
Fred Allen...Let's see..I'll cash a check when I get
to New York, but I'll need some money on the train..

I'd better figure out how much I'll need... There'll be nine meals in the diner at fifty cents a meal...That's four fifty...Hmmm...maybe I should get Rochester to pack some sandwiches... Nahh, how often do you go to New York...Besides, you get jelly all over the berth...Anyway, nine meals, that's four fifty..Yeah, that'll cover it nicely...But to be on the safe side, I'll take five dollars....I'd better get it out of my vault."

Having prompted himself into action, we then heard:

SIX FOOTSTEPS...THE TURNING OF A HEAVY IRON HANDLE WITH CREAKING OF CHAINS FOLLOWED BY THE SOUNDS OF A HEAVY IRON DOOR SLOWLY CREAKING OPEN.

There were now more footsteps and by their increasingly hollow sound, we knew Jack was descending into a cavern-like cave. The footsteps stopped again in front of a second door. We then heard the turning of an even heavier iron handle and a louder creaking of chains ending with the squeaky-creaky opening of the thick metal door. Jack started in and suddenly we heard a strange voice say:

"Halt...who goes there?"

It was the man in the vault, supposedly hired by Jack and put down there many years ago to guard his money.

"It's only me, Ed...It's okay."

"Oh hello, Mr. Benny."

"How've you been, Ed?"

"Fine, fine..Oh, by the way, Mr. Benny --"

"Yes?

"Who won the election?"

"Roosevelt...it was pretty close."

"So Hoover's out, eh?"

Though Jack was referring to the election of 1944, Ed was thinking of 1932, the last election he knew anything about.

"Yes, a long time ago...Oh say, Ed, did you have a nice Christmas?"

"Yes..Quiet, but nice."

"Good, good...Oh, Ed, I just want to open my safe now for a minute."

"Yes sir...shall I turn my back?"

"No no, it's all right...Now let's see..The combination is right to forty-five...(LIGHT TURNING SOUND)...Left to one-sixty...(LIGHT SOUND)...Back to fifteen...(LIGHT SOUND)...Then left to one-ten..(LIGHT SOUND)...There.

Next we heard the sound of a:

HANDLE TURNING...FOLLOWED BY TERRIFIC STEAM WHISTLES, BELLS, ETC.)

This ear-piercing racket caused Jack to comment: "Oh darn it, I forgot to turn off the alarm...Now Let's see..Oh, there's a loose five dollar bill."

With that comment on his negligence, Jack picked up his travelling money, said "Goodbye" to Ed and retraced his steps back up to the surface of his living room where he resumed packing.

This first use of the famous Benny Vault was written by Milt and Tack and was such a complete success that "going down into the vault" became a standard. The vault was the second of the season's innovations and from then on was used whenever the situation permitted.

In each subsequent use the writing became progressively exaggerated. The vault went from deep to deeper, the locks, chains and alarms went from loud to louder, while Ed, the guard, played by Joe Kearns, went from old to older. The human protection for Jack's cash was augmented by a creaky draw-bridge necessary to cross a moat containing wild alligators. Ed's command of "Halt, who goes there?" was sometimes made from a sitting position -- his struggle to rise from his chair being thwarted by massive cobwebs. Eventually Ed, himself, was depicted as a veteran of the Civil War, and this, his isolation from the real world, became most apparent when on one visit Jack happened to mention the word "Girl" and Ed could not comprehend its meaning. Making an effort to help, Jack explained to him that a girl was a member of the opposite sex. To this Ed responded, quizically, "Sex?" which indicated he had either forgotten or never known.

Since this was radio, the listeners heard only words and sound effects, which meant the picture had to be formed in their individual imagination.

When the writing assignments for this same show were being decided, my partner Sam and I took the second half which included the departure. Without knowning it, at the time, we created two more elements which became fixtures on the Benny Show.

In writing our half of this show, based on the trip to New York, we started with Jack leaving the house with bags packed and five dollars in his pocket. As always on the trip east, he was accompanied by Rochester. Since they were going by train, they took a cab downtown to the Los Angeles Union Station. Upon arrival, the usual argument over the fare and tip took place. That settled, Jack and Roch entered the Railroad Station where their ears were greeted by a blasting P.A. System informing passengers that a train was "LEAVING ON TRACK FIVE...FOR ANAHEIM, AZUSA, AND CUCAMONGA." Ignoring the information, Jack turned to his butler and said, "Rochester, put on your red cap and carry my bags to the train."

Rochester, obeying the orders, left Jack as Phil Harris approached with his effervescent, "Hi ya, Jackson." The two of them exchanged comedy lines until interrupted by the P.A. announcer making a second attempt. "TRAIN LEAVING ON TRACK FIVE FOR ANAHEIM, AZUSA AND CUCAMONGA -- DOES ANYBODY WANT TO GO TO ANAHEIM, AZUSA OR CUCAMONGA?"

The announcement fell on deaf ears as Don Wilson joined Phil and Jack. The three of them continued conversing when a man who apparently knew Jack walked by saying:

"Hi ya, Jack -- where ya been -- I haven't seen you around."

"What? -- Oh,hello, hello."

The man then continued on his way. Phil then inquired, "Who's that, Jackson?"

"Oh, he's a race-track tout who used to hang around Hollywood Park."

With that Jack excused himself and headed toward the ticket window on the other side of the station. At this point the P.A. System blared out once again: "TRAIN LEAVING ON TRACK FIVE FOR ANAHEIM, AZUSA, AND CUCAMONGA...AW, COME ON, SOMEBODY MUST WANT TO GO TO ANAHEIM, AZUSA AND CUCAMONGA."

As Jack was approaching the ticket window, the race-track tout quietly moved in from the side and in a voice exuding confidentiality said:

"Hey, Jack -- Jack -- Come here a minute."

"Huh -- Oh, it's you again..What is it?"

"I didn't want to say anything while you were with your friends -- but -- where ya goin'?"

"New York."

"What train ya takin'?"

"The Chief."

"Uh - uh."

"What's the matter?"

"Take the El Capitan."

"But I like The Chief."

The tout realized this might be more difficult than expected and urged Jack to come even closer with another, "Come here a minute."

"Yeah."

"Take my tip, bud..The El Capitan will beat the Chief into Kansas City by three lengths."

"What?"

"According to yesterday's performance, it can't miss."

"Well, I'm sorry, but I'm taking The Chief."

"Look..come here a minute."

"Huh?"

"I was talkin' to the engineer who's ridin' the El Capitan and he tells me that today she's ready."

"Well...I don't know -- "

"And look at the breeding..El Capitan is by Twentieth Century out of Golden State Limited."

Jack deciding that, when it came to trains, he could make his own decision said, "Well, thanks for the tip, but I'm going to stick to the Chief."

To this the tout replied, disappointed, "Why?"

With this question Jack saw an opportunity to turn the tables. He quickly assumed the character of a tout and said, "Come here a minute...Don't nose this around, but I found out the Chief is a sleeper. So long, fellah."

The tout shrugged it off with, "Okay, okay, it's your trip."

Jack continued toward the ticket window. After a couple of steps, the P.A. System blared out again. This time the announcer's voice had more urgency. "TRAIN LEAVING ON TRACK FIVE..FOR ANAHEIM, AZUSA, AND CUCAMONGA"...followed by a tearful, "LOOK, WE'RE NOT ASKING MUCH..TWO OF YOU..OR EVEN ONE OF YOU...JUST SOMEBODY TO KEEP THE ENGINEER COMPANY!"

Jack then stepped up to the ticket window and inquired of the man behind the bars: "Pardon me, are you the ticket clerk?"

The clerk, responding to this rather silly question said, "Well, what do you think I am in this cage, a canary?"

"Well, don't get huffy about it, all I want is a ticket on The Chief."

"Oh, would you like the sixty dollar ticket or the hundred and forty dollar ticket?"

"Well..uh..what's the difference?"

"With the hundred and forty dollar ticket you ride inside."

"Well, naturally, I want to ride on the inside.. After all, I'm not as young as I used to be."

"You're not as young as anybody used to be."

It was another battle of insults between Jack, the Star, and Frank Nelson, his perennial nemesis. The verbal exchange continued until cut off by still another announcement over the P.A. The voice now had a tinge of panic.

"LEAVING ON TRACK FIVE..FOR ANAHEIM, AZUSA, AND CUCAMONGA." Then frantically, "LOOK, LOOK.. THERE ARE FIVE THOUSAND PEOPLE IN THIS STATION... ISN'T THERE SOMEBODY..ANYBODY...ARE THERE ANY VOLUNTEERS?...PLEASE, PLEASE..PLEASE..I GOT A JOB TO DO...I'LL GET FIRED IF I DON'T GET SOMEBODY ON THE TRAIN GOING TO ANAHEIM, AZUSA, AND CUCAMONGA!"

We were now nearing the end of the show and Jack still hadn't gotten his train ticket. Trying to be patient, while waiting for the irritable clerk to find him space, etc., he heard the all-important legitimate announcement:

"ATTENTION, PLEASE, ATTENTION..THE SANTA FE CHIEF NOW LEAVING FOR CHICAGO AND NEW YORK."

To the accompaniment of the train bell in the background, Jack pleaded with the ticket clerk to hurry. Over the sound of escaping steam, Rochester called, "Boss, Boss, the train is startin' to go!"

Jack grabbed his ticket and hurried toward the moving train. Over his running footsteps he heard, "THE TRAIN ON TRACK FIVE FOR ANAHEIM, AZUSA, AND CUCAMONGA HAS JUST BEEN CANCELLED."

With the crying sobs of the announcer fading in the background, Jack continued running after his moving train with Phil, Don, Mary, and Roch shouting encouragement from the rear platform of the

Observation Car. As the theme music faded in, Jack managed to climb aboard. Once again, the whole Benny gang was on its way to New York.

These two elements, added to the phone operators and the vault, raised the season's score for new innovations to four.

On this trip to the East Coast and return the Sunday broadcasts emanated from military bases and hospitals. That is, all except one which was done from the historic city of St. Joseph, Missouri. Jack had been invited to pay the city a visit and I think it's rather interesting how it came about. Three years earlier Jack did a program in which the writers thought it would be funny for Rochester, with his scratchy voice, to sing a song. The song selected was the then popular "Blues In The Night." So the next Sunday's program went on the air with Rochester moving through the house doing his chores, singing:

MY MAMMA DONE TOLD ME
WHEN I WAS IN KNEE PANTS
MY MAMMA DONE TOLD ME, SON
A WOMAN WILL SWEET TALK
AND GIVE YOU THE BIG EYE
BUT WHEN THE SWEET TALKIN'S DONE
A WOMAN'S A TWO FACE
A WORRISOME THING
WHO LEAVES YOU TO SING
THE BLUES IN THE NIGHT.

FROM NATCHEZ TO MOBILE
FROM MEMPHIS TO SAINT JOE

At this point, Jack, who was sitting near-by in his easy chair, came in with a reminiscent, "Saint Joe -- they loved me there."

It got a good laugh and on several shows to follow the device was repeated, always ending with Jack's comment, "Saint Joe -- they loved me there."

Before long, the City Fathers of Saint Joe wanted to show Jack that, indeed, they did love him there and extended him an invitation to do a broadcast from the town auditorium. On this trip, some three years later, he was able to work it in.

It was really a fun week and the local citizens making up the audience were very receptive. Our guest, Jane Wyman, the popular movie star, was a native daughter of Saint Joseph. Saint Joe was also the home of Jesse James. Jesse, with his guns, killed people in Missouri and Jane, with her pictures, killed audiences all over the world.

The following week's broadcast came from Fitzsimmons Military Hospital in Denver, Colorado. That same night we boarded the train and with a puff of steam and a toot on the whistle, we were homeward bound.

For the next several weeks the show was anchored to N.B.C. Hollywood. One of these broadcasts was done on Easter. In getting the premise for this particular show, someone pointed out that we could do a story based on the Easter Parade. We all thought this was a good idea and one of my colleagues went so far as to enthusiastically exclaim in all sincerity,"And aren't

we lucky..this year Easter comes on Sunday!" I just looked at him..then I realized his apparent discovery was very explainable. To most of the comedy writers, the word "Lent" has only one meaning -- it's the past tense of "loan".

We closed the season doing shows from Palm Springs, Santa Barbara and San Francisco. The show from San Francisco was in celebration of "I am an American Day", and was broadcast from the Civic Auditorium. Our guest star was the then governor, Earl Warren. In the years after, not only did our shows continue to improve, but so did Mr. Warren. He went from Governor to Chief Justice of the United States Supreme Court.

1944-45 was a productive season. The new elements created were the telephone operators, the vault, Jack's comedy "age", the railroad station, the tout and Professor leBlanc, the French violin teacher. The four of us were a happy bunch of writers.

For me and my partner, Sam, it proved to be a year that was doubly exciting. On the January trip to New York we were offered a contract to write the book for a new musical comedy, scheduled for a fall opening on Broadway.

This opportunity came about when producers Richard Kollmar and James W. Gardener were looking for writers and we were recommended to them by Harry Ackerman who at that time was a top executive of C.B.S.

With Jack Benny's blessings, Sam and I spent the summer in New York writing and Jack travelled through Germany doing military shows for the U.S.O. On this trip his troupe consisted of Ingrid Bergman, Larry Adler, Martha Tilton and David Le Winter.

CHAPTER VII

In Mid-August, after six weeks in New York City, Sam and I finished the book for the Broadway Show. If two writers ever had a hot typewriter, we did. I say this in all modesty because I'm using the word "hot" literally. In those days, air conditioning was a rarity and temperatures of ninety degrees -- with even higher humidity was a certainty. For the duration of our stay we leased a penthouse. Penthouse, meaning we had a room on the very top of a tall building where, with all the windows open, we could get soot-laden warm air from all four directions. Day after day we sat there at the hot typewriter, wearing only our undershorts. I can't tell you the ratio of soot to air, but there were times I called Sam "Amos" and he called me "Andy". On us, black wasn't beautiful. On some days we could have made our own carbon paper. Our typing would have been easier to read if we used a white ribbon.

During the worst of the hot spells, the better restaurants had revolving doors and some kind of cooling. The place where we ate had neither, but they did the next best thing. When you came through the entrance, the manager would grab you by the shoulders, spin you around three times, then hit you in the face with a wet towel.

On August 14, 1945, the Japanese surrendered and the celebration that took place in Times Square was really something to see. The smoke rings from the man on the Camel Sign were bigger than ever. Over-joyed civilians and servicemen were kissing and hugging. Two Marines and a sailor were dancing with the Statue of Father Duffy, completely ignoring the pigeons that were trying to cut in. It was a night I shall always remember, even at the risk of forgetting Pearl Harbor.

Our musical comedy was adapted from a book by George Malcomb Smith, entitled "Slightly Perfect." It was a story about a young insurance actuary who becomes involved with a Carnival. For Broadway we changed the title to "Are You With It?" The music was written by Harry Revel and lyrics were by Arnold B. Horwitt. In the cast we had Joan Roberts, the original Laury of "Oklahoma" and Johnny Downs, supported by Lew Parker, Dolores Gray, Kathryn Lee and Jane Dulo.

The middle of September, shortly after rehearsals started, we returned to Hollywood where we rejoined Milt and Tack and started preparing for the fall radio season.

It was to be another year of innovation -- characters, ideas and situations that stuck with the Benny Show for a long time to come -- not only in radio, but on into television. While we were writing the fourth show of the season, "Are You With It?" had its out-of-town opening in Philadelphia at the Shubert Theatre. The date was Wednesday, October 17, 1945. Sam and I were in California working, so all we could do was wait for a report from the East. Along with our wives, we decided to spend the waiting hours together.

When it got to be 10:00 P.M. Pacific Time, we knew the show must be over and, not having had one phone call from anybody, we started calling. First we called the theater, which was closed, and the phone was answered by a night watchman. At this point, we would settle for an opinion from anybody, so we asked him if he liked the show. His answer indicated that he couldn't care less. We then started calling hotels, hoping to find the Producers or anyone who might tell us something. About two hours later, which was three o'clock in the morning there, we managed to locate a member of the cast. He had difficulty talking and really didn't tell us anything about the show. However, through his mumbling, we did learn that after the performance, the entire company got together for a Champagne party. When we heard the word "Champagne", we knew we had a hit.

The next morning, the reviews came out and they were unanimously good -- some were even excellent. They all pointed out that "Are You With It", with a little cutting and fixing would be ready for Broadway.

When we showed the reviews to Jack, he was delighted and he insisted that Sam and I leave immediately for Philly to do whatever was needed. While we were gone, he had Hugh Wedlock and Howard Snyder, a team of writers who had worked for him in the past, fill in on the radio show until we could get back.

That same evening we left by plane and after a twelve-hour wait in Chicago, managed to get a flight into Philadelphia. During the next five days, Sam and I cut and fixed our musical comedy script. By this time, more notices had been printed in the West Coast papers and this prompted Jack to send us the following telegram:

SAM PERRIS:
RITZ CARLTON HOTEL
PHILADELPHIA, PA.
HAVE JUST REALIZED HOW CLEVER YOUR PARTNER
BLAZER IS. HE CANNOT ONLY WRITE A PLAY BUT
ALSO FIX MY BEDROOM DOOR. GOOD LUCK AND HOPE
THE SHOW IS EVEN BETTER THAN YOU EXPECT. WILL
BE ANXIOUS TO KNOW ABOUT IT.

JACK BENNY

Did you notice the mis-spelling of the names? PERRIS for PERRIN, and BLAZER for BALZER? It was Jack's little joke; his way of saying, "don't get too big!" In other words, he was doing the same thing that pigeon did to me on my first trip to New York.

With the polishing job finished, we returned to the West Coast and radio. Then on November 19, 1945, "Are You With It?"

opened on Broadway at the Century Theatre in New York. Again, for this more important and exciting occasion, we remained in Hollywood, but the reviews told us what we wanted to know. As one critic wrote, "Are You With It? is no longer a question, it definitely is." And it remained so, running for well over a year.

Jack's interest in the success of our Broadway venture was always present. Three or four weeks after the opening he insisted on giving it a plug on the radio show. This was done in the following manner:

Larry Stevens had finished singing his number and, as the applause died away:

JACK: That was "Just Beyond the Rainbow" from the newest Broadway smash hit, "Are You With it?"..And now, folks --

MARY: Say, Jack, talking about "Are You With It?", Didn't two of your writers, Sam Perrin and George Balzer, write that show?

JACK: (MAD) Yeah.

MARY: Well, you oughta be proud. What are you mad about?

JACK: Look...I give 'em the summer off, they go to New York, write a hit show, come back and make my life miserable.

DON: What do you mean, Jack?

JACK: Every time they come in with a radio script and I happen to say, "That joke isn't funny", they tear out the page and jam it down my throat..When they say, "That's a belly laugh," they're not kidding.

MARY: Well, Jack, if you feel that way about your writers, why don't you get rid of them?

JACK: I can't, they've got me signed for two years yet...Oh, well.

One of the great strengths of the Benny radio show was the selection and use of the guest stars. They had to fit, not only into the situation, but also into the mold, and none filled these requirements better than Mr. and Mrs. Ronald Colman. Ronald Colman was an English actor and, of all the movie stars, he was the epitome of class and dignity. His actress wife, Benita Hume, had these same qualities and together they were the ultimate of high society.

The original idea of having them as guests on the radio show came from Jack, himself. I remember when he told us he felt that Mr. and Mrs. Ronald Colman would be a great contrast, not only to the Benny character, but to all the members of the cast. Jack had no story idea, but he felt the ingredients were there. Knowing that his basic thinking couldn't be argued with, Sam, Milt, Tack and I immediately started kicking ideas around and came up with a premise which served well for the first of the many Colman appearances.

In our story line, we had the cast assemble at Jack's home. In their conversation we established that the Ronald Colmans lived next door and on that very morning Jack had been invited over to their house for dinner. Mary and the rest found this hard to believe, so Jack read them a note written by Mr. Colman, himself. It said, "Dear Jack: Glad to know you are safely back in America. Benita and I would love to have you for cocktails and dinner Sunday evening. We'll expect you around eight. Signed, Ronald Colman". Jack then mentioned he must remember to caution Rochester about getting careless because he found this invitation on the back porch.

When Mary questioned the phrase about "being back in America", Jack explained the Colmans were referring to his trip overseas last summer. Jack then excused himself and went upstairs to get dressed. Because the Colmans were such classy people, Jack put on his top hat, white tie and tails.

At the Colmans' house before Jack's arrival, we learned in beautifully English-accented dialogue that the "Jack" they were expecting was a Jack Wellington, an old friend whom they had known since the old days in England. Mr. Colman explained to his wife, Benita, that he had phoned Wellington about coming to dinner because the note he had written him had blown out the window. We also planted that the Colmans were going to stay in their casual clothes because that's the way their friend, Jack Wellington, would want it. At this point the butler, who was also English, entered.

BUTLER: I beg your pardon, Mr. Colman.

COLMAN: Yes, Sherwood?

BUTLER: Mr. Jack Wellington has arrived.

COLMAN: Oh, good, good.

BENITA: Come, Ronnie.

(SOUND: FEW FOOTSTEPS)

BENITA: Jack, Jack!

COLMAN Wellington, Old Boy!

WELLINGTON: Hello, Ronnie..Benita..It's so good to see you again and so nice of you to have me over for dinner. I came direct from the tennis courts. I hope you don't mind my being in just slacks and a slipover.

BENITA: No no, of course not, we hate formality.

The three of them moved back into the living room and in a few minutes of conversation it was established that the Colmans do not think too highly of their neighbor, Jack Benny. Also, when Wellington asked, "Is this Benny you're talking about the blighter who is on the wireless?" he was told he most assuredly was. Wellington said he was not too fond of him, either. About this time the butler reappeared.

BUTLER: I beg your pardon, Mr. Colman.

COLMAN: Yes, Sherwood?

BUTLER: There's a gentleman at the door, sir. Here's his card.

COLMAN: His card?...Hmm.."Jack Benny, star of stage, screen and radio..And will sing "Oh Promise Me" at weddings...Has own tuxedo?".Jack Benny here? What in the world could he possibly want?

This unforseen turn of events left Ronnie, Benita and Wellington staring at each other, not knowing quite what to do. Then Ronnie, hoping to get rid of the intruder, instructed his butler:

COLMAN: Sherwood, tell him I'll call him later, we have a guest for dinner.

BUTLER: But Mr. Colman, he said that you were expecting him for dinner.

COLMAN: For dinner? Benita, did you invite Jack Benny for dinner?

BENITA: No, darling..Are you sure you didn't?

COLMAN: I'm positive.

WELLINGTON: I say, Ronnie..is this the eccentric chap you were telling me about?

COLMAN: Yes. Well, his coming here is obviously a mistake, but we may as well make the best of an awkward situation..Sherwood, show Mr. Benny in..and set another place for dinner.

The butler returned to the front door, then re-entered the room followed by the uninvited Jack Benny dressed in white tie and tails.

JACK: Well, well..Hello, Ronnie..Benita.

COLMAN: ...Uh...uh..Hello, Jack...Come in.

BENITA: Yes yes, come in.

COLMAN: We're just about to have a cocktail.

BENITA: Mr. Benny, this is our friend, Jack Wellington.

WELLINGTON: Pleased to meet you, old chap.

JACK: Well..I didn't expect anyone else to be here, but that's just like the Colmans..always room for one more..Ha ha ha ha ha!...Yes, sir!

After a few cocktails, which did nothing to make the moments less awkward, Jack, aware of his own attire and the casualness of the others, said, "Well..I'll just sit here and read a magazine while you three go and dress."

Ronnie quietly explained it was just an informal gathering. For the rest of the evening Jack was an overdressed square peg in a round hole. At dinner his contribution to the conversation was a nine-course serving of boredom. For the Colmans and their friend, Wellington, Jack's presence was a disaster -- so much so, by nine o'clock they were throwing broad hints for him to go home -- none of which was understood by Jack. After awhile, however, he volunteered.

JACK: ...Well..I guess I better be running along.. Time for me to go home..Goodnight, Mr. Wellington.. very happy to have met you.

WELLINGTON: Goodnight, old boy..and with my luck, we'll probably meet again.

JACK: Yes yes, thank you.

Ronnie and Benita escorted Jack to the front door, but before exiting:

JACK: Well, goodnight, Ronnie, old boy..I had a swell time. (LOWERS VOICE) And say, I'm awfully sorry about Wellington.

COLMAN: Wellington? What do you mean?

JACK: Oh, I know you're loyal to your friends, but isn't it awful the way a guy like him can throw a damper on a party?

COLMAN: You know, Jack, there's a lot of truth in what you say.

JACK: You're telling me!..Well, goodbye.

(SOUND: DOOR SLAMS FAST)

JACK: I'm not out yet!

COLMAN: Oh, oh, pardon me.

(SOUND: DOOR OPENS)

JACK: Well, goodnight, Ronnie.

COLMAN: Goodnight.

(SOUND: DOOR SLAMS)

Earlier in the show while Jack was still at home dressing, we planted that the pants to his full dress suit were very, very tight. So tight, in fact, he should at all times avoid stooping over. After leaving the Colmans' he walked toward his own house, so enthralled with the evening, he forgot the warning.

JACK: (HUMS LOVE IN BLOOM)..Gee, they're nice people, the Colmans..(HUMS)...That Wellington seems to be a nice chap, too...But I can't understand him just dropping in uninvited...Oh well...(HUMS LOVE IN BLOOM)...On, darn it, I dropped my gloves.. (FOOTSTEPS STOP)..(JACK GRUNTS)..

(SOUND: LONG RIP OF CLOTH)

JACK: Hmm..

(SOUND: FOOTSTEPS PICK UP)

JACK: Can it be the breeze that fills the trees...

With this, the theme music hit and another show was over.

During the rest of that season and throughout the remaining radio years, it was always a delight for us and the listeners whenever we had the Colmans as our guests.

In late spring, the Navy Department invited the Jack Benny Show to broadcast on April 21, 1946, from the flight deck of the Aircraft Carrier U.S.S. Saratoga, which was anchored in San Francisco Bay. On the morning following our show, the Saratoga was to leave for the Bikini Atoll, a series of islands in the South Pacific, to participate in a history-making atomic bomb test-- a test that meant the destruction of this great ship.

Starting with Don Wilson's opening announcement, "And now ladies and gentlemen, from the U.S.S. Saratoga, which is affectionately called 'Old Sara', we bring you another old lady and here she is, Jack Benny," the next half hour was filled with the laughter of Navy and Marine personnel. Then at the finish, Jack read this tribute to the Saratoga -- "A Gallant Lady":

> "Ladies and gentlemen..I'd like to read a farewell message that was written by Captain M.S. Sheehey, the former Chaplain of the U.S.S. Saratoga. It was written in behalf of all the men who have had the privilege of serving aboard this ship...Here it is...'Dear Sara..This is a love letter because you have been the great love of thousands of us who have paced your flight deck, and boasted of your proud record.

'Nineteen years ago, Sara, with bands playing and admirals standing stiffly at attention..you were grandly launched upon your career. For most of those nineteen years you sailed a peaceful course. Then suddenly, out of that peace, came your courageous dash to Pearl Harbor, where you assumed your responsibility. Soon you were standing alone..the only American carrier between Tokyo and San Francisco.

'We'll never forget Guadalcanal..Bougainville.. Rabaul..Nauru and Tarawa..We'll never forget those twenty-six strikes on the Marshall Islands..And your last engagement..that rendezvous with the kamikazes. You staggered, fought back, landed your combat air patrol..and the next day one hundred and twenty-three of your men were buried at sea off Iwo Jima.

'That was a black day, Sara, but we, your boys, remember the other days as well..all your gay parties.. the celebrations given for every thousandth landing.. the squadrons coming home like weary birds..the glory of dawn patrols..the long chow lines and the Sunday services. We remember how our hearts lifted when every plane took off and how they sank when we counted the missing ones.

'To us, Sara, you were more than a ship, and so we, your boys all over the world, want to say farewell. You are going to perform your last service for your country..perhaps that atom bomb will put you in Davey Jones' locker.

'You won't be lonesome there, for the old Lex,and the Wasp, and the Hornet, and the Yorktown, and your little sister ship who died so gallantly, the Princeton, will be there to welcome you. And we men of the Navy want you to know that wherever your hulk may be, your spirit..the spirit of the U.S.S. Saratoga..will go marching on, and on, and on.'"

The orchestra faded in playing "Anchors Aweigh", then up full to the finish.

A few weeks later, Jack and our whole gang left on another train trip east. As we entered the Los Angeles Union Station, the crazy announcer again reminded millions of listeners that trains were still leaving on track five for Anaheim, Azusa, and Cuc---a---monga. We boarded the Santa Fe Chief and were soon on our way to New York City. From there we did the remaining three shows of the season. On the final broadcast, Jack again paid tribute to his writers. For us it was a most gratifying year.

CHAPTER VIII

The calendar year 1945 saw a challenging of the lofty position of the Benny radio show. Imperceptible at first, the slow descent continued and by the start of the new season the show was out of the top five.

The advertising agency analyzed the situation and concluded that the slide was not due to any deterioration in the program quality, but rather to the success of other programs such as Bob Hope, Fibber McGee and Molly, Edgar Bergen and Charlie McCarthy and others. In essence, they were getting a larger share of the ratings pie. In other words, the fringe listeners of the "old favorite" were shopping the dial for new favorites. This high-sounding explanation was not readily accepted by Jack. His own conclusion was simply, "Maybe they don't want me anymore". These words, of course, were uttered by a man with a punctured ego. His past lengthy perch on the mountain peak exaggerated the depth of the present valley.

In September we started the new season and after several weeks the ratings didn't get any worse, nor did they get any better. Jack's concern became more intense and our determination to do something about it increased. One morning the writers and Jack were at his home having a script conference. At this meeting we kicked around the idea of doing something that was a little bigger than usual -- something that would attract more listener attention. It was at this meeting the Jack Benny innate sense of showmanship came to the fore.

While we were discussing several possibilities, Sam came up with an idea. He suggested that we ask our listeners to write lyrics for a song and send them in to the program. Then Mahlon Merrick, our musical conductor, would set them to music. After a certain length of time these lyric writing contributions would be judged and the best ones would be awarded prizes. Jack's reaction to this was several degrees on the cool side of luke warm. Nevertheless, we all explored its possibilities. The idea was being mulled over when I, in the spirit of making a joke, said, "Jack, today on radio there are so many programs asking the listeners to write in, using twenty-five words or less, to tell why they like such-and-such a soap or so-and-so toothpaste. Every ten minutes there is a radio announcement asking people to write in why they <u>like</u> something."

By this time I had Jack's full attention and continued, "Why don't we have a contest asking people to write in and in twenty-five words or less, tell why they hate Jack Benny."

After the last word came out of my mouth, there was no laugh -- just silence. Jack sat there looking at me with absolutely no expression on his face. The stares of the other writers told me I had just made the world's biggest blunder. The eerie silence continued for what seemed an eternity. Then Jack rose from his chair, walked over to me and said, "That's it -- that's what we're going to do. I'm going to ask people to write letters saying why they hate me."

Thinking he had gone crazy, we four writers all started talking at once, trying to convince him that he couldn't possibly do such a thing -- it was dangerous -- it didn't make sense. He still wasn't convinced, so in a final effort we pointed out that it wouldn't be good to use the word "hate", especially now with the close of World War II so recent. Jack agreed on that point, but still wouldn't let go. He kept asking, "What other word can we use?"

During the following weeks he even tested the other members of the cast to get their opinion. They all agreed that the word "hate" was too harsh. Reluctantly, he accepted the verdict. Then a day or so later John Tackaberry arrived at a meeting and told us he'd been doing some thinking about the word hate and thought he had a replacement and suggested the phrase "can't stand."

Jack thought for a moment, then audibly tried it. "I can't stand Jack Benny because --- I can't stand Jack Benny because ---" Then, almost happily,he said, "That will do it. That will work. We'll ask people to write in and tell in twenty-five words or less why they can't stand me. And for the best three letters,

I'm going to give away ten thousand dollars."

By this time we began to see what Jack saw in the very beginning -- the great humor that could be done with this ridiculous idea. One of the first suggestions was made by Jack himself. "We couldn't possibly restrict the letters to twenty-five words because people wouldn't even get started on the reasons why they can't stand me."

We all knew that the contest was our new baby. Our first problem was how to present it. We knew it must be done in such a way as to insure the audience accepting it in the proper spirit. To accomplish this, we used the device of making the contest the brainchild of Steve Bradley, a fast-talking crazy publicity man played by Dick Lane. On the program of November 25th, 1945, we did a teaser by having Steve appear on the air and tell Jack he had a great idea for a publicity stunt and it would only cost him ten thousand dollars.

Jack's cheap character reaction was, "Steve, are you crazy?"

Steve assured him that he wasn't and that his idea was sensational. It would sweep the country. Nothing like it had ever been done before.

When Jack asked what the idea was, Steve answered, "I've got an idea for a contest and you'll give away ten thousand dollars in prizes."

Jack pressed for more details, but Steve refrained, saying, "I can't tell you about the contest until next week. But believe me, Benny, it will be the most sensational thing you ever heard

of. This will be the best way I've ever spent your money. So long,Benny, see you next Sunday."

With that, he exited leaving Jack and thirty million listeners wondering what this contest was all about.

Needless to say, this teaser generated much interest. On top of that, our real publicity man worked all week planting items in newspapers all over the country about the coming contest announcement on the next program.

When the big day came, we kept the subject of the announcement alive throughout the first and middle part of the program. Toward the end there was a knock on the door and Jack answered it with his customary, "Come in." Steve Bradley, the mythical publicity man, entered. Following is that portion of the script which illustrates how the contest was presented to the radio listeners.

STEVE: Hi ya, Benny,hello, everybody. Hello,hello, hello..It's me, Bradley, Steve Bradley.

JACK: Well, Steve, it's about time you got here. I've been up in the air all week about this contest idea of yours.

STEVE: Wait 'til you hear this. Sit down, everybody, sit down and let me do the talking. Now about the contest, Benny..This is the greatest thing to ever hit radio, so listen, Benny, and listen carefully.

JACK: I'm listening. Now what's the contest?

STEVE: I'm coming to that. Now for years programs have been having contests. They ask their listeners to write letters on why I like this.. Why I like that..Why I like so and so..Why I like such and such. People are tired of that stuff. I've got something brand new..something that people will enjoy.

JACK: What is it?

STEVE: We're gonna ask people all over this country to write in letters in twenty-five words or less..

JACK: Yes?

STEVE: Telling us "<u>WHY THEY CAN'T STAND JACK BENNY</u>!"

JACK: ...<u>WHAT</u>! Steve, would you mind repeating that?

STEVE: Gladly. We're gonna ask people to write in letters finishing this simple sentence.."I CAN'T STAND JACK BENNY BECAUSE--"

JACK: ..Steve..Steve, look at me..Have you lost your mind? Have you gone crazy? Asking people to do that? Why, people like me, they love me.

STEVE: Wait a minute, Benny, wait a minute.

JACK: What?

STEVE: How many people listen to you every Sunday?

JACK: Well, about..about thirty million.

STEVE: And how many people are there in the United States?

JACK: About..a hundred and thirty million.

STEVE: THERE YOU ARE..THAT MEANS THAT A HUNDRED MILLION PEOPLE DON'T LIKE YOU.

JACK: What? A hundred million people don't like me?

STEVE: And that's only in this country!

JACK: Gee, I don't know. Mary, you talk to Steve, will you..and tell him how crazy this whole idea is. I can't do a contest like that.

MARY: Wait a minute, Jack, maybe it's not so bad. At least it's different.

JACK: But Mary, all those people saying they can't stand me.

MARY: Look at Fred Allen, he's been saying that for years.

JACK: Well, he knows me. I mean, he should know better.

MARY: But Jack, maybe there are a lot of other people that feel like Fred Allen does.

STEVE: Certainly. This will give 'em a chance to put down on paper what they've been thinking for fourteen years!

JACK: And for that..for that I should give away ten thousand dollars?...I've got an old bridge lamp I'm not using..Would that --

STEVE: No no, Benny, it's gotta be ten thousand dollars.. AND WHAT'S MORE..IT'S GOING TO BE IN VICTORY BONDS.

JACK: Oh.

MARY: You know, Jack, that's a good idea. What can be better than Victory bonds?

JACK: I like the idea of Victory Bonds, but -- Oh, I don't know..This sounds so ridiculous. Ten thousand dollars for writing a letter..(SLOWLY AND SOFTLY) "I can't stand Jack Benny because.."

MARY: Jack, put down that pencil, you can't be in it.

JACK: Well, if I'm going to give away Victory Bonds, I've got as much right to try and win as anybody else.

STEVE: Go ahead, Wilson, read that announcement I gave you.

JACK: But Steve, let's talk it over a little more.

STEVE: It's too late for that. Go ahead, Wilson, read it.

JACK: But, Steve --

DON: LADIES AND GENTLEMEN, PLEASE LISTEN CLOSELY, HERE ARE THE DETAILS. TO ENTER THIS CONTEST ALL YOU HAVE TO DO IS WRITE A LETTER COMPLETING THIS SENTENCE IN FIFTY WORDS OR LESS.."I CAN'T STAND JACK BENNY BECAUSE..."

JACK: But, Don --

Over Jack's protests, Don continued giving all the details and rules, including the mailing address, ending with:

DON: THE DECISION OF THE JUDGES WILL BE FINAL AND THE SUPREME JUDGE WILL BE..THE HONORABLE FRED ALLEN.

JACK: Fred Allen! How can they do this to me! I'm really a nice guy. I grow flowers, I pat little kids on the head, I give milk to cats.

MARY: Wait a minute, Steve. Suppose there's a tie?

JACK: Yes, Steve, suppose there's a tie?

STEVE: That's impossible, Benny, people can't stand you for different reasons.

JACK: Oh, that's right. I should have known that.

DON: IN CASE OF A TIE, DUPLICATE PRIZES WILL BE AWARDED.

JACK: Duplicate prizes! Mary..Don..Phil..Say something!

PHIL: Okay..Play , boys.

JACK: I oughta have my head examined.

During the closing commercial Jack, thinking about the contest he was now saddled with, supposedly fainted and in the tag Phil Harris assisted Mary in bringing him to.

MARY: Phil..Phil, I'll rub his wrists while you pour that cold water on his forehead.

PHIL: Okay.

JACK: (GROANS)

MARY: He's coming around, Phil..Do you feel better, Jack?

JACK: (GROANS) Yes, I guess so.

PHIL: Say look, Jackson, three thousand letters came in yesterday telling why they couldn't stand you.

JACK: <u>That's my regular fan mail, they don't count</u>! Mary, I'm too weak, you say it.

MARY: Okay..Goodnight, everybody.

JACK: Thanks.

DON: DON'T DELAY, FOLKS, WRITE THOSE LETTERS TONIGHT.

Within a very few days the showmanship, the genius of Jack Benny started to pay off. The mail came pouring in. We had to hire a staff of ten women to do the preliminary reading and sorting. Our fears were allayed when it became evident that ninety-nine per cent of the letters received were written in the spirit intended. Oh, yes, there was some crank mail, but these were letters which would have been written whether there was a contest or not.

The I Can't Stand Jack Benny Contest ran for ten consecutive weeks. It was a great source of comedy and public interest. Two weeks after its inception the Jack Benny Show was once again the nation's Number One radio program.

On the tenth and final week Fred Allen, the final judge, handed down his decision and appeared on the program to announce the winners.

The first prize, twenty-five hundred dollars in Victory bonds went to Mr. Carroll P. Craig, Sr., 735 Radcliffe Ave., Pacific Palisades, California. The second prize, fifteen hundred dollars in Victory Bonds, went to Mr. Charles S. Doherty, Hotel Bolton Square, Cleveland 6, Ohio. The third prize, a one thousand dollar Victory Bond, went to Miss Joyce O'Hara, 1014 Dragoon Avenue, Detroit 9,Michigan.

The additional fifty winners of one hundred dollar bonds were notified by telegram. This information caused Fred to add: "If Mr. Benny should deliver any of these telegrams personally, please tip him generously. He has been through a terrible ordeal.. ..I am happy to say."

Though the contest proper was finished, we continued to get mileage out of it. The very next Sunday we devised a situation whereby Jack's next door neighbor, Mr. Ronald Colman, would read the winning letter.

In our story Mr. Colman got Jack's top coat by mistake and as he was going through the pockets, a folded piece of paper fell to the floor.

RONNIE: Benita, look..It's one of the contest letters.

BENITA: You mean the "I Can't Stand Jack Benny" Contest?

RONNIE: Yes, and there's a little notation on it that says it's the winning letter -- the one that won first prize.

BENITA: First prize? Oh, Ronnie, I wonder what the winning letter was like. Read it, please.

RONNIE: All right..It's a poem..

He fills the air
With boasts and brags
And obsolete
Obnoxious gags.

The way he plays
His violin
Is music's most
Obnoxious sin.

His cowardice
Alone, indeed,
Is matched by his
Obnoxious greed.

And all the things

That he portrays,

Show up my own

Obnoxious ways.

Benita, isn't that clever?

BENITA: Yes, it has such a good thought behind it.

RONNIE: Yes..(READS SLOWLY)

And all the things

That he portrays

Show up my own

Obnoxious ways.

You know, Benita, maybe the fellow that wrote this letter is right. The things that we find fault with in others..are the same things that we tolerate in ourselves.

BENITA: That's so true, Ronnie.

RONNIE: It certainly is.

The "I Can't Stand Jack Benny Contest" gave the writers subject matter for eleven weeks. And this by no means signaled the end of it. In the years that followed, any reference to the contest was always greeted with gratifying audience reaction. The contest more than served its purpose. It rejuvenated listener interest to such an extent that the Benny Radio Show never again relinquished its leadership.

For the contest idea I never expected, nor did I ever seek, any credit. My only hope is for recognition of a very interesting fact. Namely, had I suggested the same idea to any other comedian, it would have cost me my job.

CHAPTER IX

In writing about the first three years of my long association with the Jack Benny Show, I have covered the seasons in general, some individual broadcasts and a few routines specifically. Now, as we ride the crest of the rating wave, it's only appropriate we give recognition to the people -- the people whose names Don Wilson so proudly enunciated at the opening of every program: "Jack Benny, with Mary Livingstone, Phil Harris, Rochester, Dennis Day and yours truly, Don Wilson." So, in that order:

"THE STAR OF THE SHOW"

-JACK BENNY-

If my purpose were to discuss the on-stage character, rather than the man, it would be difficult to do because in many areas the two are entwined. The believability of the character depended so much upon the public's admiration and acceptance of the man.

In writing about the man, it's not a problem of knowing where to start, but where to stop. As one critic put it after he had written a review that had several barbs in it and then a few days later met Jack and was told, "I'm sorry you didn't like my show. Fortunately all the other reviewers did." The critic's reply was, "Jack, I liked it, too, but it makes for dull reading when I go on week after week and year after year writing nice things." So at the risk of being dull, I shall pursue the path the critic feared.

In 1932 Jack made his very first appearance on radio as a guest on a fifteen-minute program featuring a newspaper columnist named Ed Sullivan. When Jack was introduced by Ed, he leaned into the microphone and said to the listening audience, "This is Jack Benny talking. There will now be a slight pause while you say 'Who cares'."

At that moment he may have been right, but only a short while later -- after he started his own radio show -- it was not a question of who cares, but how many, and the weekly ratings indicated the numbers were in the millions.

Jack had the reputation of being a worrier. Personally, I never went along with this evaluation. At least, it wasn't evident when we four new writers joined him that September in 1943. If he really were a worrier, how could he have gone off to North Africa and left the task of finding a new writing staff to his business agent, then returning to the States with just enough time to prepare his opening show. Oh, he was always concerned,

but not worried. I'm happy to say that after a very few weeks even the concern seemed to lessen.

Most comedians spend their lives rejecting help as they flounder in a sea of insecurity. Maybe Jack was insecure, too, I really don't know. However, if he was in need of security, he knew what to do. He surrounded himself with good people. He paid them well, and by his manner of treatment, they knew they were highly valued. In return, he got their best efforts and respect. Jack's reward for this simple common sense approach was two-fold: Good shows and an industry classification of "genius".

Although he worked very closely with his writers and his contribution was very significant, he never took writing credit on the air or on the screen. He felt for a star to do this had a cheapening effect. Jack believed a star performer had an obligation to himself to be involved with the writing of his shows and credit for doing so was covered in his "star" billing. His ability to evaluate comedy was perhaps best described by himself. He often said, "I don't claim to always know what's good, but I always know what's bad."

In the writing sessions, Jack played the role of a writer. His opinion carried no more weight than that of any other member of the creative staff. His great contribution was in knowing the kind of things he wanted to do and then after the basic writing was finished, he became the editor. He was more a partner than a boss.

Whenever there was disagreement about the strength of a punch line, majority ruled. If the five of us, the writers and Jack, agreed on the final wording of a joke, you could bet your life it would get a laugh. If four of us thought it was right, you could bet all your money it would get a laugh. If three of us thought it was funny, you could still bet your money, but only half of it. If only two of us thought it was funny, you couldn't bet at all because it wouldn't go in.

Jack believed writing comedy should be fun. Many times we'd be working on a script and we would be digging for a line. After a while, tension would creep in and Jack would say, "Now let's just relax and take our time. We'll get it." And, of course, we always did.

I remember one time in particular during my first year on the show we were at NBC cutting and fixing a script and Jack had a strong feeling about one of the jokes. When he came to it, he said, "Fellows, I need something stronger in here." The writers greeted his comment with silence. He continued, "Something better --- something --- funnier ---."

With his little one word comments, he kept picking on the joke and we just remained silent. Then for a long moment he didn't speak, but you could tell he was still holding out for a different joke. He then said, "This just won't play."

At that point I looked at him and said, "All right, Jack, we'll change it."

A grin of victory appeared on his face. Then, looking right at me, he said, "Oh, you agree, eh?"

I said, "No, but it is possible the four of us could be wrong."

You never heard such a howl in your life. He not only laughed, but slid right out of his chair and sat there on the floor laughing. By this time everyone joined in. As the laughter died away, Jack picked himself up, saying, "Fellows, I wouldn't change that joke now for a million dollars." And he didn't.

When we were on the air, Jack delivered the line in question and it got a tremendous laugh. He turned to the control room where the writers were and, by the look on his face, we knew he was thinking, "You cocky bastards." Most comedians, if they accepted the writers' judgment against their will, would have purposely misread the punch line and killed the joke just to make their point.

In radio, Jack Benny was perhaps the most knowledgeable performer in the business. When the writers finished a script and it had his and our final approval, that was it. That was the way it was done unless we changed it. If Jack had new thoughts, he discussed them with his writers. If the writers had a suggestion, we discussed it with him. This was understood by everyone. There was no outside tinkering.

Although the onstage character of our blue-eyed comedian had many facets, the one that was best known was his miserliness. For the writers the cheap angle was a most fertile area. The mere mention of money, coupled with Jack's reaction, was always good for a laugh. If it were a sum he was expected to pay, the laugh would be even bigger.

Jack once did a monologue in which he gave a very graphic demonstration of this. He told about how he wanted Gregory Peck to be a guest star on his show. Gregory indicated he'd be delighted.

Jack, thrilled at his acceptance, said to Gregory, "How much money will you want for your appearance?"

Greg replied, "Fifteen thousand dollars."

Jack then told the audience, "When I heard this amount, I didn't bat an eye, I didn't move a muscle -- I think they call it..temporary paralysis."

Another example of using this built-in cheap, money-loving character so effectively is the time we had as a guest star a very prominent, successful movie writer named George Seaton. Mr. Seaton had just won an Academy Award, and Jack felt it would be very timely to have him on the show.

As I remember it, Mr. Seaton was introduced to our audience and then he and Jack continued on with some give and take dialogue, during which Jack told him that he must be very happy having won the Academy Award, and Mr. Seaton replied, "Yes, I am, Jack. However, I consider it such an honor I'd be just as happy winning that Oscar if it were made of papier-mache instead of solid gold."

Jack, not believing his ears, said, "What did you say, George?"

Mr. Seaton repeated, "I said, I'd be just as happy winning the Oscar if it were made of papier-mache instead of solid gold."

Jack merely looked at the audience and got the first laugh. Then he said, "I ask him to come on the show to add a little class and he talks like an idiot." This, of course, got an even bigger laugh.

The ability of the cheap character to think of excuses for avoiding paying for anything was fantastic. We once did a scene in a French restaurant which was very crowded when Jack and Mary arrived. Jack spied Douglas Fairbanks, Jr., sitting alone and suggested they go over and share the table with him. Mary was reluctant saying, "Maybe Doug wants to be alone." Jack insisted and dragged Mary over to the Fairbank table. They were graciously received and after dinner the waiter brought the check.

Mr. Fairbanks picked it up off the table and Jack quickly and firmly said, "No, no, Doug, let me take it. After all, it was your table and Mary and I barged in -- So I insist on paying it."

When Doug said, "No, Jack, I'd feel better if I paid it," Jack quickly followed with, "Well, if your health is involved, go ahead."

Jack's cheapness was so well established that we could get laughs by using just a phrase or a single word and,in many cases, just a sound. In one of our scripts we had Jack driving Mary out through the country. It was a beautiful day and Mary sat there beside Jack as he manned the wheel. By the sound of the motor, you knew they were traveling at a fair rate of speed.

Suddenly, Mary said, "Oh, Jack, look at that sign.. Peanut Brittle 39 cents a pound. Let's get some."

Jack immediately replied, "Mary, we just had lunch."

A quarter of a mile down the road, Mary again spoke up, "Jack, look at that sign..Stuffed Dates 27 cents a pound. Let's stop and get some."

Jack answered, "We haven't got time."

A little further on Mary again said, "Jack, there's another sign..Pecans 20 cents a pound. Let's stop and get some."

Jack admonished her with, Mary, what are you trying to do, spoil your dinner?"

After a pause and again over the whirring motor, Mary announced, "Jack, there's another sign. It says Candied figs, free samples."

After hearing the word "Free" and hardly waiting for "Samples", true to the character, Jack's reaction was indicated, not with dialogue, but with the sound of the damnest screeching of brakes and sliding of tires that has ever been heard by listening America. The listeners then knew his real objections to Mary's wanting the peanut brittle, stuffed dates and pecans.

Speaking of sound effects, the sounds heard on radio were rarely made by the objects they were supposed to represent. For instance, the sound of marching soldiers was made by a rack of suspended rubber pegs thumping in rhythm against a hard surface. Horses hooves were half coconut shells beating in a box of sand. A man's footsteps in snow were made by squeezing a bag of corn starch, etc., etc., etc.,

In one of the shows we took advantage of this fact and had the sound effects man, Ray Erlenborn, explain to Jack how he created the various sounds. Completely enthralled with the information, Jack asked, "In that scene I just did where I was dancing with that beautiful girl, there was a moment where we were cheek to cheek. It was so delicate. How did you make that sound of my cheek touching hers?"

"Easy, I just took a hot water bottle and slapped it with a pound of raw liver."

One of the most publicized jokes played off the parsimonious character was done in the following situation.

Late one dark night Jack was walking home all alone. As he neared his house, a voice came out of the darkness.

JACK: Hey, Bud -- Bud.

(SOUND: FOOTSTEPS STOP)

JACK: Huh?

MAN: Got a match?

JACK: Match? Yes, I have one right here in my --

MAN: DON'T MAKE A MOVE..THIS IS A STICK-UP!

JACK: What?

MAN: You heard me.

JACK: Mister..Mister..Put down that gun.

MAN: SHUT UP. NOW COME ON..YOUR MONEY OR YOUR LIFE. (LONG PAUSE) LOOK BUD, I SAID YOUR MONEY OR YOUR LIFE.

JACK: <u>I'm thinking it over</u>.

I wish I could lay claim to this "Money or your life" joke, but I can't. It isn't mine. Truthfully, the line, "I'm thinking it over," came into being quite by accident -- which, in itself, is a rather interesting story.

After setting the premise for the broadcast of Sunday, March 28, 1948, we split the show. My partner, Sam, and I took the first half and Milt and Tack took the second half. On Friday we all met with Jack for the usual clean-up session. While we were reading the second half of the show and came upon that joke, we had to agree with Jack's character, it was sensational. At this point, Milt explained what happened when he and Tack were doing their assignment.

"As we started to write the scene with the holdup man, I paced the floor while Tackaberry reclined on the sofa. We threw a few tentative lines at each other, none worthy of discussion. Then I thought of a funny feed line, but couldn't get a suitable punch to finish it. I told this to Tack saying, "Supposing we have the crook pull the classic threat on Jack, 'Your money or your life.' Jack will get screams just staring at the crook and the audience -- and if we get a good snapper on it, it'll be great." Tackaberry seemingly ignored me. I kept thinking of lines and discarding them as mediocre or worse. Finally one line seemed better than the rest. I threw it half-confidently. I said, "Look, the crook says, 'Your money or your life' and Jack stares at him and the audience, and then the crook repeats it and says, 'Come on, you heard me -- your money or your life?' And Jack says, 'You mean I have a choice?'"

"Now frankly, that wasn't too bad an answer, but Tackaberry made no comment, good or bad. I got angry and yelled, 'Dammit, if you don't like my lines, throw a couple of your own. Don't just lie there on your fat butt daydreaming. There's got to be a great answer to 'Your money or your life.' And Tackaberry angrily snapped at me, 'I'm thinking it over.' In a split second we were both hysterical. We knew we could never top that."

They had stumbled onto the kind of a line they had been looking for. But whether it's mumble, bumble, or stumble, it was and still is a great joke.

I have often been asked if Mr. Benny was as stingy in person as he was on the air. The answer to that, of course, is definitely not. He was most generous. Not only in his business affairs, but in other ways. On many occasions I have stopped by the Benny residence to drop off a script or have a word with Jack. Since I was expected, I was ushered in and told to go right up stairs. There I would find Jack and Mary in their bedroom eating a dinner which consisted of a small chicken sandwich, with the crust trimmed, and a cup of tea. Meanwhile, downstairs, the household staff of eight people would be sitting around a table eating steaks or prime rib and all that went with it. I don't know if the help had drinks before dinner, wine with, and creme de menthe after, but they knew it was there if they desired it.

Another source of much Benny comedy was his blue eyes, which, incidentally, were not just blue but described as being "bluer than the feet of a Sicilian wine crusher" or "bluer than

the thumb of a cross-eyed carpenter" or "Bluer than the stomach of a dachshund that's been chased through a huckleberry patch."

Now, of course, these descriptive lines are exaggerations, but his eyes really were blue -- so blue they picked up lint.

My relationship with Jack Benny can be better appreciated when I tell you that I, personally, know some writers who after a script session with their comedian, would run to the nearest men's room and literally throw up. This regurgitation was an emotional reaction to the treatment and degrading remarks their hard work had received. In some cases, it was an expression of their feeling toward their boss -- and I'm sure he, or she, richly deserved it. I once said to one of these gastronomically upset writers, "Why don't you quit?" He answered, "Because I've got to eat." When you think about it, he's absolutely right. If you are going to continue on a job where you keep throwing up, you've got to eat.

In rehearsals, Jack was always in charge. Frequently, he would make suggestions on proper readings. Sometimes a bit player, making a first appearance on the Benny Show would be so eager to please he or she would over-emphasize certain words. Jack in a very gentle kind manner would say, "No, no, don't read it that way..just keep it conversational -- Otherwise we have no laugh. Now let's try it again." He was always helpful and always had great respect for other performers.

Because of this, the Benny Show never had difficulty getting guest stars. The biggest names, not only in show business, but in government and the business world, were always eager to appear with Jack. They knew they would be treated with dignity and given good material. Some of these guest stars had the reputation of being very difficult to work with and yet on Jack's show they quietly did their job. The fears they had elsewhere did not exist with us.

Jack Benny loved to laugh, even when the joke was on him. What I'm about to tell you is a true story -- it really happened. On a broadcast we did in New York we used a popular black singing group called "The Ink Spots." They sang commercial lyrics about Lucky Strike Cigarettes to the melody of their big hit recording, "If I Didn't Care." It was very impressive and Jack really enjoyed it.

About two months later, Jack appeared on a big benefit show with several other stars. When he walked into the rehearsal hall, he noticed a black quartet sitting over in the corner. After taking his place which was some distance away, Jack thought it would be cute if he reminded the quartet of the appearance they recently made on his show, so, without moving closer and projecting his voice, he sang in a very corny way, "If I didn't care - would I feel this way. Would my every prayer begin and end with just your name - Boo - Boo - Boo - Boo -- Boo --, etc." When they heard him, they looked up and Jack took off his glasses and gave them a big wink. A little later Jack got their attention and again started singing "If I didn't care - would I feel this way.. Would my every prayer begin and end with just your name..etc."

Again he gave the quartet a big exaggerated comic wink and they smiled back.

A short while later Jack repeated the whole thing -- got their attention, sang in his corny way, "If I didn't care, etc., etc." He again finished with a big wink. At this point a member of the quartet got up, crossed the room to Jack and said, "Mr. Benny, you must be thinking of 'The Ink Spots' -- We are 'The Mills Brothers'." And so they were.

This is a true story and Jack didn't hesitate for a moment telling about his embarrassing situation. It was the kind of thing he would do on the air.

In real life, Jack was always interested in the affairs of his country, but on stage he played no political favorites. I remember April of 1945, we were in Palm Springs working when the news came of President Roosevelt's death. Jack immediately turned to us and said, "Fellows, I'm not going on the air Sunday with a comedy show." He made this decision many hours before the Network had decided to use Sunday for a memorial program. A program on which Jack appeared.

He was a close friend of Presidents Truman, Eisenhower, Kennedy, Johnson, Nixon and Ford. Jack would not do a political joke unless it was obvious it was all in fun and meant no criticism or harm. In later years he told me it disturbed him to see young comedians use their shows as a platform to espouse their own personal political leanings. As he put it, "They had neither enough maturity or class."

CHAPTER X

"WITH...MARY LIVINGSTONE"

As everyone knew, off-stage Mary Livingstone was Mrs. Jack Benny. They first met when Jack was on a vaudeville tour which brought him to the Orpheum theatre in downtown Los Angeles. At the time Mary was a clerk behind the stocking counter in the May Company. I never did know what brought Jack to a silk stocking counter, but I presume he was buying something for his sister Florence who lived in Chicago. Not too long after they first met, Jack and Mary were married and soon she started appearing with Jack in his stage routines. Later when Jack went into radio Mary came along and for many years performed as a regular member of the cast.

Her marital relationship to the star never in any way dictated her position on the show. To the writers, Mary was

a call girl -- (Hm, that doesn't sound right.) For the writers whenever the services of a female were needed, Mary would -- Uh, let me put it this way. If the Benny Show were a baseball team, Mary would be known as a utility player. Mary was a girl whose laugh and voice were always a welcome contrast in scenes and routines which otherwise would have been all male. Her onstage relationship with Jack was that of a friend -- not a girl friend. In situations where Jack needed help, he got it from Mary. When the script called for him to be picked on, it was done by Mary. If the story had Jack in a romantic situation, it was always done with some other female -- a guest star, or just a bit player. However, Mary was always within hearing distance so that she could get in her remarks.

A perfect example of Mary analyzing the situation and then moving in with just the right comment took place in a scene we did which supposedly took place right after a concert. Dorothy Kirsten, the famous operatic singer, was our guest star. In our story she had just finished performing and Jack, Mary and Don Wilson went backstage to visit with her. While Miss Kirsten and Don discussed the musical details of the evening's performance, Jack stood silently by trying to find something to elevate himself by forcing his way into the elite conversation. Mary, of course, was aware of this. She also was aware that Jack knew nothing about opera.

In writing the scene, Mary's attitude was very clear, and all I needed was a short incisive line to sum it up. As the two-way conversation continued between Don and Miss Kirsten, Mary patiently waited for Jack to make his move. The dialogue went like this:

DON: Miss Kirsten, I want to tell you that I saw you in "Madam Butterfly" Wednesday afternoon and I thought your performance was absolutely magnificent.

KIRSTEN: Well, that's awfully kind of you, Mr. Wilson.. but who could help singing Puccini, it's so expressive..particularly the last act starting with the allegro vivacissimo.

DON: Well, that's being very modest, Miss Kirsten, but not every singer has the necessary Bel Canto and flexibility or the range to cope with the high tessatura of that first act.

KIRSTEN: Thank you, Mr. Wilson, didn't you think in the aria "Un Bel Di Vedremo" that the strings played the Con Molto Passione exceptionally fine and with great sostenendo?

JACK: Well, I thought --

MARY: Oh, shut up.

JACK: ....Mary, I was only trying to be sociable.

Mary's three word directive was not only effective, but got such a tremendous response from the audience, Jack many years later, gave it a special evaluation.

Another memorable area of Mary's performances were those frequent occasions when she read those letters she got from her mother. The audience always knew a letter had arrived when Mary would start laughing, followed by Jack asking, "Mary, what are you laughing about?" Mary would then explain she got another

letter from Mama and Jack, delighted at the news, would inquire using a line such as, "What does Plainfield's cure for the hiccups have to say?"

Mary would then clear her throat and start reading. The following is a sample of Mama's correspondance.

"My darling daughter Mary..Everything is fine at home and the weather is getting to be real nice. We're pretty sure that winter is over now because last month the Ground-hog came out of his hole, saw the sunshine and went back in again to wake up papa. Papa came out, saw me, and punched the Ground-hog in the nose."

Jack, of course, always injected his little comments, such as, in this case, "Oh, your mother just put that in for a laugh."

Mary continued, "Now where was I? Oh yes..'Even though it's nice now, two weeks ago we had a very severe blizzard, and when your uncle Harry came in from the barn, his milking hand was frozen.'"

"Gee."

"'I hope it thaws out soon as I'd like to get the cow out of the house!'"

"That's the silliest thing I ever heard."

"'And oh yes, Mary, I have some exciting news for you. Last Thursday a whole gang of us went out for a drive and your sister Babe and her fiancee were riding in the rumble seat. We hit a bump and the rumble seat snapped shut.'"

"My goodness!"

"'We worked for hours and couldn't get it open..so we called the minister and he married 'em through the keyhole.'"

"Can you imagine that?"

"'Your Cousin Bobbie blew rice at 'em through a straw.'"

"Oh boy, what a family."

"'No other news..all my love, Mama.'"

CHAPTER XI

...PHIL HARRIS...

Phil was the orchestra leader -- a tall, good-looking curly-haired individual who believed that Phil Harris was God's gift to Phil Harris. He no doubt felt that this egotism was forgiveable because of his willingness to share himself with others. His personal evaluation was evidenced by an assortment of entrances, such as:

"Okay, folks, the show may be floppin',
But Harris is here to start things poppin',
Appreciate me -- appreciate me."

Or:

"Okay, folks, here's your favorite pixie.
Harris is here and he's right from Dixie."

Or:

"Up to here you've had nothin' but corn.

Now Harris is here and a Star is Born" -- and then had the conceit to add:

"Oh, Philsy, you're so pretty, it's too bad you're not two-faced."

I do not present the above lines because they have any semblance of cleverness, but only because they accurately define Phil's stage character. In our routines, Jack (whom Phil always called Jackson) would chastise him for his overbearing self-appraisal. This, in turn, would make Phil defensive and in pleading his case, the ignorant portion of his character would surface. This was done by having Phil mispronounce words and say things which displayed the character's total lack of education.

Phil's value to the show was not his music but his personality. His stage character would not have been possible were it not for the great sense of humor contained in the real person. In serious conversation, Phil had a way of making his point and getting laughs at the same time. One incident in particular comes to mind.

Shortly after World War II started, Phil and his long-time buddy, Frankie Remley, the left-handed guitar player, were walking along a deserted stretch of beach. Night was beginning to fall and they both were in a very sober, somber mood. Their thoughts were on the war and the impending draft.

Many years ago, in a boyhood accident Phil had lost a toe on his right foot. After a long while of silent walking,

Phil turned to Frankie and said, "Frankie, do you think the Army would take a man with one toe missing?"

Frankie, sensing the reason for the question, and trying to be helpful, replied, "Well..I don't know, Phil, but I would guess that, yes, they would take a man with one toe missing." Having asked the question and heard the answer, Phil trudged on without comment. After about fifty silent, deliberating paces he spoke again, saying, "Frankie, do you think they'd take a man who had two toes missing?"

A short while later both Phil and Frankie joined the Coast Guard, which indicates Phil never got around to any self-surgery.

Though Phil was billed as the band leader, the actual chore fell to a very fine arranger-composer named Mahlon Merrick. Mahlon's musical career with Jack spanned almost thirty years. This is not to imply that Phil never led the musicians, because he most certainly did. In our scripts, however, he did more miss-leading.

As for the "boys in the orchestra", what a great bunch of fellows they were. We did a hundred jokes about Remley and his guitar, Charlie Bagby the pianist, Sammy Weise, the drummer, and also the names of Wayne Songer and Hollis Bridwell and others became known to all our listeners. According to our scripts, Phil and his boys consumed more liquor than any group ever assembled on the airwaves. Here, too, the jokes were usually tied to something topical. I recall years ago there was a coal mine strike which forced the steel mills to shut down. There was much publicity telling how if the mills would bank their furnaces,

they would be ready to renew operations on short notice. However, if the furnaces were allowed to cool, it would take weeks to start them up again. With this background information we had Phil make his entrance late in the show, causing Jack to accuse him of being off in a bar somewhere.

Phil protested saying, "No no, Jackson, not anymore. I'm on the wagon."

Jack, surprised, said, "You...you on the wagon?"

"Yes, siree. All I take is two drinks a day."

"Phil, if you're on the wagon, you shouldn't drink anything."

Phil answered that with, "Look, Jackson, my stomach is like a steel mill..you can shut it down, but don't let the fire go out."

In one of the shows Phil was telling about a particularly wild party he and the boys had and when the number of empty liquor bottles was mentioned, Jack became concerned about the safety of the party participants and asked, "Phil, in their condition, how did they get home?"

"Oh, it was easy. You know that white line down the middle of the street?"

"You mean they followed it?"

"Followed it! They were holdin' onto it!"

We certainly were not the first to do drinking jokes nor were we the last. However, between Phil and the boys in the band, we did enough of them to supply the industry for years. Oh, other shows would switch them a little, but some would use them word for word.

We also used to kid the orchestra about their appearance and the fact they knew nothing about music. Such as the time it was necessary to add two harps and Frankie the guitar player protested because when the harps arrived, he thought they were fencing him in. Another time, Bridwell had a crew cut and Jack described him by saying, "The way his hair stands up, he looks like the warden gave him a pardon thirty seconds after they threw the switch."

On one occasion Jack summed up the band by introducing them as "Phil Harris and his international orchestra -- International meaning they are just as well liked in San Diego as they are in Tijuana."

At this point I think it's only fair to tell you the truth. The members of the band were actually very fine musicians and in their personal life they could not possibly live up to those awful things we used to say about them. As a matter of fact, most of the musicians were also engaged in other trades or professions. Some actually owned and operated their own businesses. One musician in particular, after several years of playing saxaphone in Phil's orchestra left the world of music and entered politics. His name is Ernani Bernardi and for many, many years now has served the San Fernando Valley as a member of the Los Angeles City Council. At one time Ernani was given serious consideration to be a candidate for the office of mayor.

Yes, Phil Harris and all that came with him were a definite asset to the radio show and his on-the-air character permitted him

to remind Jack of that fact. On one particular broadcast after a highly successful routine, Phil looked right over the top of his microphone and said to the star, "Jackson, you need me."

The gall of such a statement evoked the desired audience response and as the laughter died away, Jack replied, "Phil, I need you like a moose needs a hatrack."

Though Jack's line beautifully filled the purpose of the moment, it did not receive the audience response we all expected. This, I'm sure, was due to their lack of familiarity with the after-death utility of a moose's antlers -- a use which is so prevalent in the public buildings of small backwoods towns. By those people who were able to conjure up the mental picture, the smartness of the line was greatly appreciated. The "hatrack" joke was created by Sam Perrin and in the years to follow has been used verbally and in print -- and always without proper credit.

CHAPTER XII

...ROCHESTER...

For many years the Rochester character, played by Eddie Anderson, was always a highlight of a Benny Show. At the time, Eddie was perhaps the only black man playing a continuing role on a major comedy program. In his role of a butler he served his master well...also, by being a companion and confidant. There were also times when he was an advisary. When confronted for occasional laxity, his comments excusing his action or lack of action were such exaggerations they were classics. Each week at the point in the program when Jack answered the ring of the telephone and heard a scratchy voice on the other end saying, "Hello, Mr. Benny, this is Rochester," you knew someone was in trouble and it could be either one.

Eddie Anderson, the man, was to a degree a Rochester. More than once the almost unbelievable things that happened to

Eddie became hilarous routines for "Roch." This can be clearly illustrated by an incident that happened after a script for a Sunday broadcast had already been written.

Late Friday afternoon, the news wires and radio flashed a bulletin saying, "Eddie 'Rochester' Anderson has been lost at sea." It then went on to say that on Thursday, Roch and a couple of his friends went out deep sea fishing in a small boat and hadn't been heard from since.

When the writers heard this news, we felt terrible because it meant if the Coast Guard didn't find Rochester, we'd have to write another spot for the show. Of course, I'm only kidding, but it is true that knowing Rochester as we did, we found it hard to give this particular perilous situation all the seriousness it deserved. Sure enough, early the next day more bulletins were broadcast saying that Rochester had been found and was now safely ashore.

With this happy ending no change in our script was necessary. However, because the news item had national coverage, we took advantage of it and rewrote the Rochester spot. We had Jack home alone listening to music on the radio when suddenly an announcer's voice cut in:

MEL: We interrupt this program to bring you a special news bulletin. Rochester Van Jones, who has been adrift in the Pacific Ocean for the last two days, has been found by the Coast Guard and towed into port.

JACK: What?

MEL: Rochester is the butler of that famous comedian, Jack Bentley.

JACK: That's Benny. Oh my goodness, Rochester adrift in the Pacific..I didn't even know he was on a boat. Well, thank heaven, he's safe..When he gets home I'm going to --

(SOUND: PHONE RINGS)

JACK: Maybe that's him.

(SOUND: CLICK OF RECEIVER)

JACK: Hello.

JANE: Long distance call for Jack Bentley.

JACK: That's Benny...I'll take it.

JANE: Very well.

JACK: Hello, Hello? Is this Rochester?

ROCHESTER: You were expecting maybe Shipwreck Kelly?

JACK: Rochester! I just heard about you being in the ocean for two days. How are you?

ROCH: Salty!

JACK: I know, I know, but tell me what happened?

ROCH: Well, Boss, me and my friend Roy were about twenty miles off Catalina, when we developed motor trouble.

JACK: Uh huh.

ROCH: And you know I can't swim.

JACK: You can't?

ROCH: No. And then the inevitable happened..
A big wave swept me overboard.

JACK: Gee, that's terrible.

ROCH: Yeah, and to make matters worse, I landed right next to a vicious-looking shark..So I got back to the boat fast, and I --

JACK: Wait a minute..you just said you couldn't swim.

ROCH: I didn't think I could <u>run</u> on the water, either, but I <u>did</u>!

JACK: Well, what happened then?

ROCH: Well..when we weren't rescued after the first day, we realized we were in a tough spot..So we started sending out messages in bottles.

JACK: What did the messages say?

ROCH: "Send more bottles!"

JACK: Rochester, I hope you weren't drinking out there.

ROCH: Oh, no Boss, no sir. But after the second day, we sure got hungry..And fortunately, a bird landed on the back of the boat.

JACK: A bird..good.

ROCH: So I picked up my unloaded rifle, took aim, and --

JACK: Unloaded rifle! What good was that?

ROCH: I just wanted to frighten 'im enough to lay an egg!

JACK: Did you frighten him?

ROCH: Frighten 'im! He laid two eggs and three strips of bacon!

JACK: Rochester, don't be ridiculous .. A bird can't lay bacon.

ROCH: Boss, when you got a gun in your face, you find out you got talent you never knew you had.

JACK: Never mind that..Now tell me, how did you get back to shore?

ROCH: Well, the Coast Guard finally found us and towed us into the harbor.

JACK: Well, I'm glad it came out all right..It certainly was an unusual experience.

ROCH: It sure was..Hee hee hee.

JACK: Rochester, what are you laughing at?

ROCH: I never thought I'd lose a weekend on <u>water</u>!

JACK: Neither did I..Anyway, Rochester, I'm glad you're safe and hurry home.

ROCH: I will.

JACK: Goodbye, Rochester.

ROCH: Goooooooood-bye.

The off-stage Rochester had a way of doing things which reached a point of concern to others. Rehearsals would start without his presence, but he always managed to come through the door just in time to do his spot. On train trips he would be the last to step aboard. I remember one time we pulled out of Los Angeles and were headed East and Roch was not on the train. We were all convinced that at last he had cut it a little too fine and hoped that this would teach him a lesson.

One hour and a half later, the train pulled into San Bernardino to make a five minute stop and who do you suppose was there on the platform waiting for us? The man, himself -- and he was accompanied by several warm boxes he had picked up at his favorite barbecue pit. After a long blast on the whistle, the train lurched forward, this time with Rochester on board, and we all settled down for a pleasant trip to New York. A short while later Rochester opened the boxes and passed out the contents -- ham, pork, beef -- anything you wanted and plenty of sauce. From there on, the engineer didn't really have to use his whistle -- you could smell us coming.

In the middle of the feast, I said to Jack, "I think Roch knows that you can't get too mad at a man when you're chewing on one of <u>his</u> spareribs."

CHAPTER XIII

"..DENNIS DAY..."

Though preceded by other singers (among them Frank Parker and Kenny Baker) and substituted for by Larry Stevens, Dennis Day (Eugene Patrick McNulty) must be regarded as the singer of record for the Benny Show. Dennis' performing talents reached far beyond the beauty of his singing voice. He was an accomplished mimic and throughout the years he played a wide variety of characters.

The basic radio character played by Dennis Day, the singer, was that of a dumb, silly kid whose prime object was to do or say things that annoyed Jack. For instance, in one of our shows we had a guest star who was also a singer. Therefore, there was no reason to use Dennis that particular week.

In the forepart of the show we used the other members of the cast and also the guest, who sang a song. The last scene, supposedly after the broadcast, took place at Jack's house. Rochester was there when Jack came bursting through the door. In a frightened, trembling voice he quickly told Rochester to pull down all the shades and turn off the lights because,as he walked home from the studio, he was followed by a man wearing a black hat and a trench coat. As they both hurried around the room pulling the shades, a rock came crashing through the window. Tied to the rock was a note which read:

"Get out of town before it's too late!"

By now Jack was so frightened he called the police. In a few minutes they arrived, caught the culprit, and of course it turned out to be Dennis. His reason for doing such a thing was because, as he explained it, "I wasn't allowed to sing on the show tonight."

That was the end of the story part of the show. In the tag, after the commercial, Jack had Dennis come out and take a bow. At this time Jack said to him, "Dennis, when you followed me home from the studio, you did it so well I have to admit I really got an eerie feeling."

Dennis then asked, "What did you say, Mr. Benny?"

Jack repeated, "I said I got an eerie feeling."

Dennis,sensing the bait had been taken, said, "Gee.. you know, that's where I was born."

Jack said, "Oh, Erie, Pennsylvania?"

Dennis said, "No, Feeling, West Virginia."

I know this joke is about as corny as you can get. As a matter of fact, when I thought of it, I was ashamed to say it. However, when I did, it got a big laugh from the cast and we decided to use it in the show because it was perfect for Dennis. So perfect, in fact, we used it twice more in later shows.

For those of you who are prompted to ask, "How can you use the same joke several times when each show is supposed to have all new material?", let me explain.

When we did the joke the first time, it was new and fresh to everybody. Several months later when our script had a similar situation, I suggested we use it again, explaining that in that length of time one-half of our audience would be new listeners--people who had not heard the joke the first time. Of the remaining listeners, only half of them would remember hearing the joke the first time it was done. This meant that only twenty-five per cent of the audience could accuse us of repeating. Jack agreed and on that basis we did the joke a second time. Fortunately, the studio audience response was just as big as it had been previously.

Near the end of the season a situation developed again with Dennis wherein the "eerie feeling" gag was a perfect fit, so I again suggested we use it.

This time Jack looked at me and said, "George, we've done that joke twice. How can we do it again?"

"Easy," I replied. "After Dennis does the punch line -- 'No, Feeling, West Virginia,' you shout at him to get out. Then while those listeners with the good memories are righteously

accusing you of doing a joke you have done not only once before, but twice, you turn and say into the microphone, 'Ladies and gentlemen, the reason I got so mad at Dennis is because that's the third time he caught me with that same lousy joke.'"

Jack accepted my reasoning and we did the joke for the third time. It again got a big laugh, plus an extra laugh from the added line.

The device of having Dennis bait Jack into utter frustration was frequently used and soon became so firmly established we could get humor just be referring to it. For instance, on appearances where Dennis wasn't even present, Jack would tell the audience:

"Dennis Day was over to my house last week and when it was time for him to leave, I walked him to the door. Then as he left, he said, 'Goodbye, Mr. Benny, have a pleasant trip.' I said, 'Thank you.' Then I went upsairs and was half-way through packing before I realized I wasn't going anyplace."

The naivete of the Dennis character was always amusing and sometimes, shining through his murky stupidity, there was a ray of honesty. I remember once we had a situation where Dennis came in after the show started and when Jack asked why he was late, Dennis explained he couldn't help it because he was in a department store shopping and for over an hour he was stuck between floors.

Jack accepted this as a valid excuse and commented that it must be frightening - being stuck between floors for over an hour in an elevator. Dennis then told him that he wasn't

on an elevator -- he was on an escalator.

Jack, immediately getting this ridiculous picture said, "Escalator! Dennis, for heaven's sake, why didn't you walk either up or down?"

Dennis, very sincerely, said, "That would be cheating."

Jack, feigning acceptance of this logic said, "Yes, yes, that would be cheating."

Then Dennis quickly informed him, "A lot of people did."

Jack once told the audience his only fear about Dennis was that in a democracy like ours, he could become President.

I don't know about President, but Dennis was smart enough to have his own show on N.B.C. for many seasons.

CHAPTER XIV

"..AND YOURS TRULY..DON WILSON."

For many years Don was regarded as one of the top announcers in the business. Saturated in sincerity and dripping with dignity, his voice carried the sponsor's message into millions of homes. In our group he was the educated one -- the fountain of knowledge. When Jack would take a stubborn stance, we frequently used Don to prove him wrong.

Physically, Don was what you'd call a "big man". He was not nearly as fat as we made him out to be. However, with his large frame, he did have a substantial inventory of stored-up calories, or at least enough for us to get good audience reaction with such lines as:

"Don, are those your chins, or are you chewing on a Venetian blind?"

This would usually prompt Don into defending himself, saying, "Jack, I'm not fat..It's just that I have small bones." Only to have Jack counter, "Don, fish have small bones and I have yet to see a mackerel with three chins."

Then there was the time Don made his entrance and Jack, noticing he was upset about something, asked him what was the matter. Don answered with a very pouty voice, "I weighed myself this morning and the bathroom scale said, 'One hundred and seventy pounds.'"

"But Don, that's wonderful."

"I thought so, too, then I noticed my stomach was resting on the wash basin."

In spite of the above dialogue, Don's presence in the cast seemed to lend an air of order to many situations that would otherwise have been chaotic.

As Jack, himself, once told me, "Besides being a fine announcer, Don, with his jovial laugh, had a way of lighting up the drudgery of rehearsals. "

Don Wilson, the announcer, was such a perfect ingredient, he remained part of the Benny Show mix for thirty-four years.

CHAPTER XV

THE BIT PLAYERS

The word "bit" tends to minimize, but a bit player on the Benny Show was a major performer. They were the best in the business; namely, Mel Blanc, Frank Nelson, Bea Benedaret, Sara Berner, Benny Rubin, Artie Auerback, Joe Kearns, Sheldon Leonard, Elvia Allman, Herb Vigran, Viola Vonn, Iris Adrian, Dick Lane, and others. The list is not necessarily in order if importance, for on a given week any one of these people might play a role that was the motivation for the entire show. For this reason "playing the Benny Show" was the goal of every actor or actress. They knew that a job well-done could lead to additional appearances or to possibly even becoming a regular. This exalting of subordinate players can only happen when the star puts his own ego under lock and key so it can't get out and destroy what is best for the show.

As I previously indicated, Bea and Sara were the telephone operators -- Gertrude Gearshift and Mabel Flapsaddle. For several years their routines would pop up whenever Jack would attempt to make a phone call -- such as:

BEA: Oh, Mabel?

SARA: What is it, Gertrude?

BEA: Mr. Benny's line is flashing.

SARA: I wonder what he wants now.

BEA: I'll plug in and find out.

(SOUND: PLUG IN)

BEA: Hello....Yes, Mr. Benny...Very well, I'll see if I can get him for you.

(SOUND: PLUG OUT)

BEA: He wants I should ring his house and get him Rochester.

SARA: Gee, you sounded awful formal when you was speaking to Jack. Did you two have a fight?

BEA: No..in fact, just the other night he took me to a preview -- we saw Rita Hayworth in Salome.. It was an exciting picture, especially when Rita did the dance of the seven veils.

SARA: Gosh, did she take off all seven?

BEA: No, she stopped when she took off number six -- But Jack will never know.

SARA: Why not?

BEA: He fainted at number five.

SARA: You're kidding..Jack really fainted?

BEA: Yeah. He closed those baby blue eyes and slid right off the seat.

SARA: Well, whatta you know. You've been seeing a lot of him lately, haven't you?

BEA: Yeah, I've been seeing Jack so often I had to turn down a date with Dennis Day last week. Imagine Dennis wanting me to walk with him in the St. Patrick's Day Parade.

SARA: Why not -- with your complexion, you're a natural.

BEA: Well, look who's talking -- Jeanie with the light brown teeth.

SARA: All right, let's not argue. Tell me more about your date with Jack Benny.

BEA: Well, after we left the preview, he drove me up on Mulholland Drive, pulled over to a lonely spot, turned off the ignition and said, "Well, what do you know, I'm out of gas."

SARA: No.

BEA: Yeah. So I said, "I'll be happy to buy some."

SARA: I'll bet that embarrassed him.

BEA: Embarrassed him nothing - he syphoned a gallon out of his tank and sold it to me.

The talents of Bea and Sara were not confined to the operators -- they also played a variety of other parts.

Another stalward performer and long-time member of the Jack Benny family was Frank Nelson. If you ever go into a department

store and approach the floorwalker, saying, "Oh, Mister.. Mister..", and he answers with a, "Yesssssssss?" that bites your head off, then answers your questions with insults, you can be sure it's Frank Nelson.

In writing the scripts we always knew we had Frank when we needed someone to drive Jack crazy. Using the same character, Frank would hold any position the script called for. He might be a store manager, clerk, real estate agent, doctor -- any occupation where Jack would run into him.

In one of our scenes, Jack and Mary were in a restaurant. They had already ordered and the waiter approached with their food on a large tray held high above his head. When he reached the table, the waiter tripped, dumping the food all over Jack. With an empty soup bowl resting on his head, Jack started a spirited argument with the waiter, but soon, realizing he wasn't getting anywhere, he said:

JACK: Well, I've had enough of you. I'm gonna talk to the Maitre De. Oh, Captain - Captain --

NELSON: Yesssss!

JACK: Are you the Captain?

NELSON: Who do you think I am mixing this salad.. Caesar?

JACK: Never mind that. Just look at me..look at my suit..meat and potatoes and gravy all over it.

NELSON: Next time you come in, we'll give you a bib.

JACK: I don't need a bib. This waiter <u>spilled</u> all this food on me.

NELSON: Well, accidents will happen.

JACK: Accident,nothing. He did it on purpose.

NELSON: Good!

JACK: Never mind that. Just look at my suit.

NELSON: Say! You are a mess..with all that gravy on you.. I'll wipe it off.

JACK: Not with a piece of bread!...For heaven's sake.

MARY: Captain, just wipe him off with a napkin so we can go home.

NELSON: Certainly. Hold still, Mr. Benny.

(SOUND: SWIPE, SWIPE, SWIPE)

NELSON: That does the coat..Now for the pants.

(SOUND: SWIPE, SWIPE, SWIPE)

JACK: Don't forget my shoes.

NELSON: Oh yes, your shoes.

(SOUND: SWIPE, SWIPE, SWIPE)

NELSON: There..Now, Charlie,hand me the scissors.

JACK: Scissors!

NELSON: As long as you have that bowl on your head, I might as well give you a haircut.

MARY: A hair cut!..That's ridiculous.

JACK: Mary, keep out of this...Charlie, hand me a magazine. Not too much off the side, Captain.

NELSON: Yes, sir.

(SOUND: SNIPPING OF SCISSORS)

As Jack sat there contentedly humming to the rhythm of the snipping scissors, the studio audience particularly enjoyed how, true to his character, Jack was willing to forget his complaint because, after all, wasn't he getting a free haircut?

Mr. Kitzel, played by Artie Auerback, made a first appearance as the little hot dog man who advertised his wares by singing his little jingle, "Peekle in the middle and the mustard on top.. Just the way you like 'em and they're all red hot." Though after a season or two the hot dog man and the tune were dropped, Mr. Kitzel became a regular and for many years played the part of a friend whom Jack would continually run into. Mr. Kitzel was actually a variation of an earlier Benny Show character called Schlepperman, played by Sam Hearn.

Benny Rubin, a long-time personal friend of Jack's, played numerous parts on the program for as long as I can remember. As a matter of fact, Rubin was the first to play the tout. Later it was played by Sheldon Leonard.

And let's not forget Joe Kearns, the old man in the vault, or Herb Vigran, a regular who played many different roles.

From Mel Blanc the radio listeners heard more than just voices. They also heard pigs, dogs, cats, parrots, horses, cows, wood-peckers, Hammond organs, car motors, etc., all done by Mel and without props. If it made a sound, Mel could duplicate it using only his throat, mouth and nose. During some of his creations, I think some of the sounds also came out of his ears. Mel played Jack's parrot and would stand up at the microphone

making his squawks and whistles. As funny as the parrot routines were, they became even funnier when you realized it was being done by a parrot with a moustache.

One of Mel's most effective efforts was making the sound for the motor of Jack's old Maxwell. The sound man would mechanically reproduce the sound of the Maxwell's starter. After several revolutions the motor would start to go. At this point, holding the microphone closer to his mouth, Mel would take over by going into a fit of coughing and sputtering which would continue for ten to fifteen seconds. Then to indicate the motor was stalling, he would top it off with a long diminishing wheeze. But this wasn't just a simple, everyday wheeze. Mel made a noise that sounded like the asthmatic wheeze of a dying swan exhaling its last gasp through at least eighteen inches of congested neck.

By dwelling on sound and imitations, I certainly don't mean to over-shadow the countless speaking parts Mel also did on the programs. He probably played more characters than anyone. As mentioned before, he was the crazy train announcer who kept urging the travelers to take the train to Anaheim, Azusa and Cucamonga. Also, the store clerk who was driven to shooting himself by Jack who couldn't make up his mind what to write on the card in Don Wilson's present. Each time Mel would gift-wrap the box, Jack would come back and have it unwrapped so he could write something different on the card. After Jack did this a dozen times, Mel went absolutely hysterical and wound up shooting himself.

Another time Jack bought Don some shoe laces for Christmas and then couldn't make up his mind whether the laces should have

plastic tips or metal tips. This, too, ended with Mel absolutely destroyed.

And the French violin teacher, Professor LaBlanc, was also played by Mel. Following are some excerpts from the first time he came to Jack's house hoping to impart some of his musical knowledge.

JACK: (DOING VIOLIN EXERCISES..END WITH SCRATCHY NOTES)

MEL: No no, Mr. Benny, no!

JACK: Did I do something wrong, Professor?

MEL: (CHUCKLES UNEASILY) No no, Mr. Benny. Perhaps it is my fault..but..do you mind if I tell you something?

JACK: No no, of course not..After all, you're the teacher and you probably know more about the violin than I do.

MEL: Thank you..Now Mr. Benny, you are holding in your hand a very delicate instrument.

JACK: Uh huh.

MEL: (VERY DESCRIPTIVE) The music from the violin is like the singing of the angels..like the murmur of the breeze..like the rippling of the brook.. (DREAMY) Now..<u>play</u>.

JACK: (LOUSY VIOLIN EXERCISES..STOPS SUDDENLY, ELATED) ..Gee, it <u>does</u> sound like that, doesn't it?

MEL: Mr. Benny..perhaps..if you held the violin upside down.

JACK: But Professor, I can't play that way.

MEL: Let's try anything!

JACK: But..but Professor, I don't think I'm good enough to do tricks yet.

MEL: Very well..We will try it again..This time I will help you..I will count off.

JACK: Okay.

MEL: Ready..One..Two..

JACK: (PLAYS EXERCISES..TWO STRAINS)

MEL: (JOINS IN, IN RHYTHM) Raise your little finger higher --

JACK: (CONTINUES EXERCISES..ONE STRAIN)

MEL: (IN RHYTHM) Keep your nose up off the G string.

JACK: (CONTINUES EXERCISES..ONE STRAIN)

MEL: (IN RHYTHM) A little softer while you're learning.. Not so loud, my stomach's turning.

JACK: (CONTINUES EXERCISES..TWO STRAINS)

MEL: (IN RHYTHM) Hold your bow so strokes are littler.. They should make you play for Hitler.

JACK: (CONTINUES EXERCISES..HITS CLINKER AND STOPS) Hmm.

MEL: Mr. Benny, Mr. Benny, the violin is an instrument that is supposed to soothe you..to calm you.. TO MAKE YOU RELAX --

JACK: Professor --

MEL: (GETTING MAD) TO SETTLE YOUR NERVES..THE SINGING OF THE ANGELS --

JACK: Professor --

MEL: (MADDER) THE MURMURING OF THE BREEZE..THE RIPPLING OF THE BROOK.

JACK: Professor!

MEL: Oh...forgive me, Mr. Benny..I lost my temper.

JACK: Oh.

MEL: I wish it was my hearing.

That first violin lesson continued for several more minutes. Then, having had enough of the struggle, Professor LaBlanc announced to his pupil:

MEL: Mr. Benny..for today the lesson is over.. through..finished.

JACK: Oh..Well, okay, Professor, but tell me.. Do you think you can make a great violinist out of me?

MEL: Well, I think I can do something for you..but it will take time. How old are you?

JACK: Why?

MEL: How much time have we got left?

Leaving Jack to ponder the real meaning of the last question, the Professor went out the door. But return he did..many, many times during the years to follow.

In the mid-forties, my partner Sam and I were writing a satirical sketch based on a recent motion picture entitled "The Treasure of the Sierra Madre", starring Humphrey Bogart.

The story was set in Mexico and naturally, in our version, we had Jack playing the Bogart part. The sketch opened with Jack arriving in a little village in the wilds of Mexico.

As we tried to get the dialogue started, I had an advantage because I was bi-lingual. I spoke English and I also knew two words of Spanish -- Adios (goodbye) and Si (yes). Not being able to think of any routine with the Mexican character saying only "Goodbye", I turned to my other word, "Si". Since "Si" meant "yes", it would have to be used as an answer to questions. However, you can only say "Yes" or "si" so many times, and after the third question, I knew that the fourth would need a different answer. So in our script, when Jack arrived in the Mexican village, he needed some information and, seeing a Mexican bandit, he approached him:

JACK: Hey, you..come here a minute...Are you a Mexican bandit?

MEL: Si.

JACK: I suppose your men are tough, eh?

MEL: Si.

JACK: I guess they would kill us at the drop of a hat?

MEL: Si.

JACK: What's your name?

MEL: Cy.

JACK: Cy?

MEL: Si.

That was the first of the Si - Cy routines. Two or three shows later we used the character again and variations were added. Jack found out that the Mexican named Cy had a sister.

When he asked her name, Cy answered, "Sue." Jack repeated, "Sue?" The Mexican replied, "Si." Jack, inquisitive about Cy's sister Sue, asked, "What does she do?" The Mexican answered, "Sew." Jack followed with, "Sew?" and the Mexican again hit him with, "Si."

For over twenty years the "Si-Cy" routines were a highlight of the Benny Shows. Its success in getting gales of laughter is attributed to its sheer simplicity and, of course, the perfect performances of Jack and Mel.

"THE SPORTSMEN"

1946 was also the year for the introduction of the Sportsmen Quartet. On the opening show of the season, Don Wilson, filled with pride of accomplishment, told Jack about his summer discovery of a quartet which would be just perfect for use in the middle integrated commercial. In fact, this quartet was so good, he took the liberty of signing them up to an eight-week contract and Jack would have to pay them only five hundred dollars a week.

Jack, using the dictates of his character, explained to Don, "The words 'only'and 'five hundred dollars' never go together." Nevertheless, if they were as good as Don said they were, Jack was willing to pay it.

When it came time for the commercial, the quartet was introduced and Jack was all ears. Don read the sponsor's message and the quartet punctuated the end of each sell line by humming one note -- that's all. After the third sell, all Jack had heard

from the quartet was the same lousy note, hummed three times.

Looking at the audience, Jack forlornly asked, "For this I'm paying five hundred dollars?"

Don continued reading the sell lines and the quartet hummed the punctuation. The result was inevitable. Jack threw both Don and the quartet right off the stage. As always, whenever Jack was frustrated or embarrassed, the audience loved it.

The idea of using a quartet that sang only one note came from Sam. Jack appreciated the potential humor in such a situation and was smart enough to know that to make it work effectively, it had to be a good quartet. You couldn't just take four guys and ask them to hum. With this in mind, we hired the 'Sportsmen'.. (Bill Days, Marty Sperzel, Gurney Bell and Max Smith.)..one of the best quartets in the business.

The Sportsmen were hired for only the one show because no one knew for sure how it was going to work. However, after that first appearance, they were brought back week after week. Soon the rendition of only one note grew into singing songs with lyrics expounding the selling points of the sponsor's product. These commercial lyrics were written by Mahlon Merrick and always reached a point of such silliness they forced a completely frustrated Benny into the long remembered efforts to stop the quartet by shouting, "WAIT A MINUTE -- WAIT A MINUTE -- WAIT A MINUTE -- ---- <u>WAIT</u> --- <u>A</u> ---- <u>MINUTE</u>!

This would bring the singing to an abrupt halt, leaving Jack standing there in defeat. His imploring look to the audience was always greeted with loud laughter.

The Sportsmen soon became very popular on the show and remained with us season after season after season.

Jack Benny was one of the first, if not the first to integrate the middle sell into the continuity of the program. This mixing of the product sell lines with the entertainment dialogue was a device to hold the attention of the listening audience during the presentation of the sponsor's message. During commercials people have a tendency to talk or read and, in many cases, it's an opportunity to go to the bathroom. This is supported by a survey taken by the water department in one of our large cities. They appropriately named their report "The Flushmeter". Their findings documented that during commercials there was an upsurge of forty per cent in the consumption of water being used to flush toilets. Perhaps this use of water should be more correctly called a "down-surge". The results of this survey caused concern amongst city officials. They knew that if all three networks plus the local stations ever synchronized their middle commercials every reservoir in a radius of two hundred miles could become an instant dust bowl.

Jack started integrating the commercial back in 1932 when his sponsor was Canada Dry Gingerale. He incorporated the commercial plug in the following scene:

Three Arabs were lost on the Sahara Desert for twenty-three days with no food and not a drop of water. They were about to relinquish their bodies to the broiling sun when suddenly they saw a caravan of nomads coming toard them. The three Arabs with their last ounce of strength started crawling on all fours.

When, exhausted, they could drag themselves no further, they were seen by the nomad tribe. The chief of the tribe, upon seeing the condition of the lost Arabs, gave each of them a bottle of Canada Dry Gingerale. The Arabs took the bottle of Canada Dry and through cracked lips the liquid flowed over their parched, swollen tongues, down their dusty throats, and into the stomachs of their dehydrated bodies. When they had emptied the bottles of Gingerale, not one of them sad it was a bad drink.

Before leaving the area of supporting people, I would like to answer a question that is so frequently asked. Namely, "Where do you find talent?" Just as frequently and truthfully, the answer is, "You never know." To elaborate, I recall an incident that happened one day as my colleagues and I were leaving N.B.C. Studios. As we headed for the parking lot, we were approached by a young lady who nervously told us she was trying to get started in radio acting. In her hand she had a recording of some of her voices and characters and asked if it might be possible to have Jack Benny listen to it. The other three writers were completely disinterested. Perhaps, thinking of my own start in this business, I told her to give the record to me and I'd see what I could do.

A day or so later I took the recording into Jack's office. When he indicated he would listen to it, I put it on the record player. We both listened silently for several minutes, and suddenly Jack said, "Wait a minute -- there's something that sounds interesting -- Play that again." I picked up the arm and set the needle back for the replay. From that point to the finish there was no further comment. Having kept my promise to the young lady, I returned her recording.

Two weeks later we were casting a show. One of the female parts was still open and we couldn't decide who would be right for it. Suddenly Jack said, "George, what about that girl we listened to on the record?" "Could be," I said, and that afternoon we had her come in for an audition. She got the job. A short time later we used her again and soon after, because of these appearances on the Benny Show, she was receiving calls from other shows.

Many, many years went by and I had completely forgotten about the incident. One day I happened to be in a producer's office when she walked in. After greeting me, she said, "I'll never forget what you did for me." When I told her I really didn't know what she was talking about, she reminded me of the incident. I do not cite it here as a means of telling you I'm a nice guy. To convince you of that, it would take much more. I'm sure the reason I helped her is because I remember how helpful people were to me when I was struggling.

The incident with the girl and her record was a little unusual. The next incident was also unusual, but it didn't work out that well. It happened during one of our road trips. We writers were having dinner in a small town restaurant in the mid-west. A young fellow came to the table and asked, "What would you like to order?" He had a high, squeaky voice which broke us up. During the dinner we purposely ordered things we didn't even want just to hear him talk. Each time he spoke, we had to hold our sides in an effort not to let him know.

A few weeks later back in Hollywood we had a part in a script we thought this kid with his high voice would fit into beautifully. We contacted him and sent him a train ticket to Hollywood.

On the first show he was very, very funny -- big laughs. On the second show, same thing. On the third show, his routine wasn't quite right so we made several last-minute changes. When he came in for the final rehearsal, he kept saying his old lines.

Finally, Jack said to him, "Wait a minute, it doesn't say that in the script."

Then our new discovery took a long, puzzling look at the page and said, "Well, it was that way yesterday."

At that moment we know that we had a problem. He couldn't read. Instead of a star being born, it turned out to be an abortion. By noon the next day our discovery was on his way back to his home town. Today, who knows? He might be the owner of that little restaurant, greeting and entertaining the customers with that one simple question, "What would you like to order?"

The strength of the Benny cast is evidenced by the fact that in 1946 Phil Harris and Dennis Day signed long-term contracts to star on their own shows. Don Wilson, from time to time, served as the announcer on other programs. Also, several of the actors and actresses who played the bit parts for us appeared frequently in roles in motion pictures.

CHAPTER XVI

Throughout the radio years, the work pattern remained pretty much the same. Monday off -- Tuesday devoted to settling on an idea or theme -- Wednesday the two teams started writing separately on their half of the show. On Friday morning about ten o'clock the writers and the script girl trekked over to Jack's home. When he came downstairs and entered the library, we were all in our places with "bright shiny faces". I'm really not sure about having bright shiny faces, but I am certain we were all in our places.

For some reason or other, within the first few weeks of our association the placement of the bodies was established and rarely, if ever, broken. Upon first entering the writing room, we would probably plop down in the nearest chair or couch. After a session of small talk, we would decide it was time to go to

work and, as if on cue,in a musical chair fashion, we would shift to our working places. This proper placement was law and if perchance you stepped over to your chair and the temporary occupant hadn't reacted, you'd ask him to move. In a writing session with the star, where you sit can be very important. I was privileged to have an advantage. On those days when we worked at the Benny home, my chair was right next to the candy dish. Only after the candy was gone did I notice Jack was on my left.

The working relationship of the writers was not perfect, but it was close to it. We respected each other. Our individual value to the show had been proven. Therefore, there was no need to compete amongst ourselves. We had security and anything we could do to make our job easier, we did -- even to the point of contributing to the other team's assignment. While working separately on the "rough" we kept in touch by phone and if one team thought of something that could be used in the other team's half of the show, it was passed along, to be used or not at their discretion.

When we were working with Jack, if someone had a thought that sounded as if it had possibilities, we all jumped in and tried to make it work. It never really mattered which writer had the original basic thought. By assuming this attitude, our weekly tasks were finished easier and faster. I don't know if this came from being smart or lazy. I do know it got the job done, and according to the ratings, very satisfactorily.

Conversely, on too many shows the writing staffs suffer from individual insecurity. This sets up a situation wherein Team "A" is very much aware of Team "B". If Team "B" is getting more than their share into the show, Team "A" will hold back

enthusiasm for material that is really good, will find fault with it and do anything to dampen the possibility of acceptance; the strategy being, the longer a script remains unfinished, the more chance to get some of your own stuff in. I am convinced there are name writers who attained their position through creative trickery in down-grading the work of their colleagues (sometimes even their own partner) and not by their own writing ability. Fortunately, the Benny radio staff was spared this kind of activity.

The purpose of the Friday session was to fix and polish the rough draft. These meetings with Jack were always fun, and this was very important. It is my contention if people writing comedy aren't having fun, in all probability they aren't writing good comedy. I don't mean to say that creating jokes or humor is one continuous laugh, because it certainly is not. I just feel that the best comedy comes from those who work in an atmosphere where efforts are appreciated and there is time for the writers to enjoy the fruits of their labor.

We were very fortunate to be working for a man who was perhaps the most knowledgeable comedian in the business. Notice I didn't say "funniest comedian". There were others who were funnier, but Jack knew more about the intricacies of comedy than anyone else I can think of. I believe if Jack had been only one of the funniest, he probably would not have enjoyed the great success he did.

If I may say so, our rough drafts were usually very good. This was certainly not due soley to the staff's writing ability, but also to the people and the characters with which we had to

work. All tops -- in fact, by this time Phil and Dennis had their own shows and Rochester had his own racehorse. We also had Jack's cheapness, his blue eyes, the violin, his age (39), the telephone operators, the vault, etc., etc. When you write for a show that has this much continuing "meat" you only have to write the weekly "potatoes"..and if you've done a pretty good job with the "meat and potatoes", the listeners get the gravy.

As we moved along from one page to the other, cutting, fixing, replacing -- each of us had our own way of indicating they had just thought of something funny. Milt would give out with a sort of suppressed laugh which would be accompanied by the shaking of his shoulders. Then, with everyone listening, he'd tell his joke. We always knew Sam was about to contribute something when we'd see his eyes roll toward the ceiling. Tack's signal was a quick folding of his arms. As for me -- I'm what they call a "stander". Just before speaking, I would stand up. Then, with all eyes and ears turned my way, I'd say what was on my mind. Several times during the day I would stand up, get their attention and the only reason I got up was to go to the bathroom. May I be the first to say that many other times I'd stand up and with everyone listening, I'd tell my suggestion for the script only to wish I had gone to the bathroom.

Writing jokes is very much like composing music. In a joke, the words are the lyrics, the tempo of the delivery is the rhythm. Inflection and enunciation is the melody and the delicate proper placement of the words is the arrangement or orchestration. Therefore, I suggest to new young comedians: If in doing your comedy routines you give your audience lyrics,

rhythm, and orchestration, you can't miss. If they don't laugh at your jokes, they can dance to them. So, with this in mind, never do your routine for an audience of less than two people.

One of the nice things about writing for Jack Benny was your identity. He never denied your existence. On the contrary, he publicized it -- not just in conversation, but in interviews and on the air. On one occasion when he was a guest on Fred Allen's program, the routine hinged on the Benny-Allen feud. At one point, Fred hit Jack with four or five funny, but terribly insulting lines. Jack stood there at the microphone and took it as long as he could. Then, looking straight at Fred, and with the whole country to hear, ad-libbed, "You wouldn't dare talk to me like that if my writers were here!"

Jack was never regarded as a comedian who was fast with the impromptu, off-script line or joke. His first writer, a man named Harry Cohn once said, "Jack Benny couldn't ad lib a belch after a Hungarian dinner." Whether this comment was made to be vindictive or merely for its humor, I do not know. I do know, however, that it is not true.

Many times Jack told me of lines he had thought of during broadcasts and almost injected into the program, but didn't. His restraint can be attributed to his respect for the written word and his knowledge that outside lines only serve to dilute, if not destroy, the believability of the scene ~~or~~ scenes, written by his writers to whom he always gave full credit.

Contrast this to a breed of comic who, after a successful performance, will take his bows in an attitude that everything

clever he said or did was created or ad-libbed by him and at such times even resents the very thought that writers were involved. However, this same performer, when through his own ineptness messes up a good joke or routine, never hesitates to tell the audience either by gesture or by comment that his writers were at fault. Some have been known to vent their feelings with cutting remarks. I personally feel that these individuals should be labelled so that "ye - the audience - shall know them." They should be made to perform wearing a blazer bearing a crest over the spot where their heart should be. This identifying crest would have a forked tongue on a cluster of sweaty palms, running rampant on a field of insecurity.

If the case I plead for writers seems strong, I am not the first to do so. This basic truth was once expressed by an executive who, upon looking over a vast moving picture and television studio, pointed to the numerous giant sound stages and said, "Without *writers these buildings would be nothing but warehouses."

In late summer of 1945 we had to find a replacement for Jane Tucker, the script girl. Jane evidently found that while working for a comedian and his writers, life was a barrel of laughs, but a barrel of laughs wasn't life. So she left the show to get married.

* Those men and women who know their craft and by their professional success have earned the title.

Finding someone to take her place would not be easy. Thinking of the requirements -- working in a room with four writers and a comedian, all talking at the same time and being expected to write down everything that was said, I suggested, "Maybe we'd be better off if we hired an octopus and put a fountain pen in each tenacle. Not only could it take down every word, but an octopus could furnish its own ink." I immediately withdrew the suggestion when I realized we were accustomed to having a girl and with an octopus I wasn't going to get close enough to find out.

Several weeks later we hired a young lady named Jeanette Eymann. Jeanette was a secretary at the Advertising Agency, and soon mastered her new job as script girl with us. A few years later she, too, got married. However, this time we didn't need a replacement because we found that the new Mrs. Barnes was just as efficient as the former Miss Eymann.

I would suppose that by now you have the impression that the working hours of a writer are more or less regular and in the confinement of an office or some other area. Loosely -- very loosely -- that is correct. Actually, a writer works constantly -- anywhere he happens to be -- with pencil and pad or just by making mental notes. Being more specific, let's start from the moment we go off the air on Sunday Evening and assume we have no idea for the following week. Even though the formal schedule is "Monday-off" you automatically think of possible premises to be discussed at the Tuesday morning meeting. This process starts immediately after the finish of the broadcast as you drive home from the studio.

At the Tuesday meeting, if not earlier, the outline will be agreed upon. At the end of the first work day a writer returns home with the unwritten part of the script pushed into a little corner way back in his head. It's supposed to stay there until he starts working again the next day, but it never does. At the most unexpected times it will slip out of the corner and into your think chamber and soon, perhaps during dinner, a blank stare comes over your face and the next thing you hear is your wife shouting, "George, you're not listening to me." And she's right, you weren't. You were thinking about the show. You quickly make some notes on a piece of paper; or, if she's not looking, on the tablecloth. As the evening goes on, it happens again and again, and each time she becomes a little more upset. This is where a writer has to make a decision -- what's more important -- his wife's friendship or jokes for the next week's show.

Before you know it, it's time to go to bed, and for some reason or other, her friendship becomes more important. However, by this time it's okay, because since you got home, you thought of two cheap jokes for Jack, a fat joke for Don, a dumb joke for Dennis, half a Rochester routine and a suggestion for the last spot that might make the whole show even better than the original outline.

The "thinking" doesn't stop with the lights out. Two -- three -- or four o'clock in the morning you suddenly wake up with a thought that isn't just funny -- it's sensational. Without turning on the lights -- because your friend is sound asleep -- you very stealthily slide open the drawer of your bedside table,

take out a paper and pencil and in the dark start writing down the thought that woke you up. If you want to go back to sleep again, you must write it down. Even though in the morning you know you'll not be able to read it. Actually, this is a very good thing. The few mornings I was able to decipher my half-asleep notes written in the dark of night, they made no sense at all.

While my wife makes breakfast, I get dressed. With the show uppermost in my mind, I finish my toast and coffee and start out the door. At this point, I am faintly aware of my wife saying, "Goodbye". I look back and say, "Huh?" and she sternly repeats, "I said, goodbye." By her voice I know she expects a reply so, even though she stands there in a robe, half-asleep, I say, "Why, where are you going?" With her "Never mind" reverberating in my ear, I drive out the driveway and head for the office laughing to myself as I think about my two cheap jokes for Jack, the fat joke for Don, the dumb joke for Dennis, the Rochester routine and hope that Jack and the others will like my idea for the last spot. At the end of the second work day, the remaining 'unwritten' portion of the script is again tucked away in a little corner in the back of my head where it <u>supposed</u> to stay until the next morning.

By Thursday night the rough draft is finished. On Friday morning we go into Beverly Hills for our meeting with -- Oh-oh, I think we've come full circle. Isn't that where this chapter started?

CHAPTER XVII

Writing a weekly comedy show is not easy. However, due to one of Jack's basic philosophies, the chore was made less difficult. He believed we should never try to top last week's show. In other words, if you finish a broadcast that was very good or maybe even excellent, don't start writing the next script with the attitude that you are going to make it even better than the last show. Every show is a separate project. Each week, if you do the best you can in both writing and performing, you'll have a high percentage of good programs and the number of those that are excellent will fall into place.

The actual writing of any program cannot start until after the staff has settled on the basic story or idea. This is always the toughest hurdle to get over, and when agreement on story is reached, everyone breathes a sigh of relief. Once I used this ever-present problem as a set-up for a comment at one of our script re-write sessions.

We were several weeks into the season and had just finished a rehearsal. Hilliard Marks, the producer, informed us we were three minutes too long and cuts would have to be made. Since we would be going on the air in a very short time, the writers and Jack busied themselves with the task.

Suddenly, out of the blue, I said, "Hilliard, how many shows do we still have to do to complete the season?"

While everyone waited for the answer to what seemed to be a ridiculous question, Hilliard had taken out a calendar and, after several moments of serious counting, said, "We still need twenty-seven shows."

When I heard this, I stood up, and angrily slapping the table said, "Oh, Sh--, I knew this would happen!"

Jack, hearing my comment, said, "George, what's the matter?"

I then told him, "Hilliard says we need twenty-seven more shows and I've got twenty-eight ideas."

Jack let out a roar that could be heard all over the studio.

"Jack," I said, "this is no laughing matter. We now have the problem of deciding which one of my twenty-eight ideas we don't want to do!"

In constructing our shows, we always included those strong, well-established elements which the studio and listening audience had grown to love and expect. Certainly, into this category you would have to put those scenes we did at the

railroad station. Loyal Benny fans were always delighted every time we did it. Whenever publicity was released that we were about to start off on a trip, listeners would anticipate the upcoming program because they knew it would be written around our departure. The packing, the cab ride to the station entrance, followed by that moment of expectation when the big doors would open and Jack would enter to the now-famous announcement, "TRAIN LEAVING ON TRACK FIVE FOR ANAHEIM, AZUSA, AND CUCAMONGA" -- the insulting ticket agent, the uncooperative luggage men, the tout and all the other characters who made Jack's life miserable. Because of this audience anticipation, I told the staff an idea I had that might be interesting. They agreed and the next time we started off on a trip we did it.

It was simply this: We would pack as always, go to the station as always. The big doors would open and Jack would step into the station as always. But this time there would be no crazy train announcer. Instead, Jack and the audience would hear a train announcer with a very pleasant voice giving legitimate train information. When Jack went to validate his ticket, check his baggage, buy a magazine, etc., etc., here, too, he was treated with the utmost courtesy. This, of course, he did not understand, but was overjoyed that finally, once, just once, he was able to go through the Union Station without any trouble whatsoever.

After the train pulled out of Los Angeles, Jack, sitting in a drawing room with Mary, Phil, Don and Dennis, couldn't forget

the Union Station and the wonderful turn of events. Several minutes later Mary said, "Oh, darn it, I forgot to buy a magazine."

Jack, wanting to be helpful, volunteered, "Mary, that's no problem. When we stop at Pasadena, I'll jump off, run in and get you one."

Mary protested, but Jack insisted. When the train pulled into Pasadena for a ten minute stop, Jack got off, ran toward the station, opened the doors and was greeted with the crazy, "TRAIN LEAVING ON TRACK FIVE FOR ANAHEIM, AZUSA, ETC."..and from that point on, all hell broke loose. Jack had trouble with the girl behind the magazine counter, the station master, the tout and all the other favorites -- played by the same people he had escaped at the Union Station. And, of course, the humor was that it was all Jack's fault. If he had stayed on the train, he'd have missed them altogether.

The delay device worked perfectly as evidenced by the reaction when Jack and the gang first entered the Union Station. When the audience heard a very pleasant voice on the P.A. make a legitimate train announcement, you could actually hear the, "Oooooohhh" of disappointment.

Because the railroad station scene was such a favorite, we used it whenever we had an excuse. However, to keep it from becoming stale, we had to keep coming up with new angles for the established routines. This was a continuing search for all the writers and you never knew where or when an idea for a variation might strike.

For example, in 1946 or '47 I was driving in the car listening to the radio. A popular singer of the day was singing a song entitled "How Are Things In Glocca Morra?" which had recently become a hit. I immediately saw the possibility of putting these musical questions to comedy use. A few weeks later when the song was at the peak of its popularity, the show was taking a trip to Chicago, which meant we would again be doing a scene in the railroad station.

On the broadcast we started as always with the identifying announcement, "TRAIN LEAVING ON TRACK FIVE FOR ANAHEIM, AZUSA, AND CUCAMONGA." Jack then met Dennis and did some kind of a silly routine, leaving him with, "I'm going over to validate my ticket." As Jack threaded his way across the station, we heard the P.A. announcing:

MEL: (FILTER) ATTENTION PLEASE, TRAIN LEAVING ON TRACK EIGHT FOR MINSK, PINSK, AND GLOCCA MORRA.

JACK: Hmm..I wonder which ticket window I should go to. I beg your pardon Mister, but are you validating tickets?

NELSON: What do you think I'm doing with this rubber stamp, voting for Hoover?

JACK: Look, Mister, all I want to do is get my ticket validated..I'm going to Chicago.

NELSON: Chicago?..Well!

JACK: Yes..I'm returning in four weeks.

NELSON: I knew there was a catch to it.

JACK: Now look, Mister, I'm going to report you to the station master and see that --

The threat was interrupted by a very dignified man saying to Jack, "Pardon me, just a moment. I'm in a hurry. Do you mind if I go first?"

Answering the stranger's request, Jack said, "No, no, it's quite all right."

The man then stepped to the window to be greeted by the ticket agent.

NELSON: What can I do for you, sir?

MAN: Well, I'd like to know something..I just heard the train announcer say that the train on track eight now goes to Minsk, Pinsk, and Glocca Morra.

NELSON: That's right..Now what is it you want to know?

MAN: How are things in Glocca Morra?.....Is that little brook still leaping there?

NELSON: Yes, yes, it is.

MAN: Does it still run down to Donney Cove through Killey-beggs, Kilkerry and Kildair?

NELSON: Yes, it does.

MAN: Is that willow tree still weeping there?

NELSON: Uh huh.

MAN: Does that lassie with the twinklin' eye come smiling by and does she walk away sad and dreamy there, not to see me there?

NELSON: Yes, yes, she does.

MAN: That's all I wanta know. Give me a ticket to West Los Angeles.

NELSON: Here you are and have a pleasant trip.

MAN: Thanks.

JACK: Hmm..To him he's got to be nice yet.

The Glocca Morra routine (using the exact lyrics of the song) with Jack looking on in frustration, was the highlight of that particular broadcast and in the years that followed has been often discussed when writers and performers gather together. Recently, in a published book the author referred to it as being a brilliant piece of comedy. Personally, I wouldn't grade it that high. However, in the light of much of the comedy material we see and hear today, maybe it does take on an aura of brilliance.

The Benny staff was possibly the most compatible group of writers in radio. Even though our personal backgrounds were different, we had little difficulty channeling our thinking and keep it focused on one goal. When working for someone like Jack, the desire to please was very strong. However, this singleness of thought did not entirely eliminate periods of disagreement. I remember an occasion when we decided to do a show around Jack doing his Christmas shopping. We all agreed that a department store would provide much opportunity for comedy.

"No question about that," said Milt, "but what will we do for the first half of the show?"

"Shopping," we replied. "We'll open with Jack coming into the store and go from there for the full program."

Milt insisted that it was impossible, pleading, "You can't stay in one place that long."

Nevertheless, we wrote the show as planned -- opening in the store with Jack and the other members of the cast doing their Christmas shopping for the entire program.

I'm happy to say that the show played well. So well, in fact, that it was Milt, the dissenter, who suggested the idea for the next week's program; namely, we go right back into the department store on the premise Jack wanted to exchange something he had purchased the week before. We not only did it, but from that point on, each season found us going into a department store at least once -- usually twice -- and sometimes three times.

There was another occasion of disagreement and this time I was the hold-out. One morning I came in with an idea wherein Jack would invite all his friends, plus several people in Beverly Hills society, to his home for dinner. Naturally, knowing Jack's cheap character, the invitees could not understand how or why Benny would go to all this expense.

In routines discussing Jack's switch in character, I knew we could get big laughs. Also later when everyone gathered at Jack's home for a lovely evening, and especially when all were seated at the dining-room table eating food that was really quite tasty, the kitchen door flew open and two men entered, loudly announcing they were from a kettle company and had prepared this dinner free of charge with the idea that everyone in attendance

would buy their kettles. When the guests objected, the doors were locked and the two men moved from one guest to the other, forcing them to sign agreements to purchase their pots and pans. As the selling pressure mounted and the objections grew louder and louder, the show would come to a raucous finish.

When I finished verbally presenting my idea to Jack and the others, my three colleagues said, "It won't work."

"Why not?"I reacted.

"Because no one knows about companies putting on dinners to sell kettles," they replied -- not only in unison, but very seriously.

To me, of course, this conclusion was ridiculous because I, the country boy, had been familiar with these dinners for years. Still, thinking they might be right, I used our next road trip to conduct my own survey. In each city I would ask a few people if they knew about these kettle demonstration dinners and I didn't find one person who didn't. Some of those questioned insisted on going into great detail concerning dinners they had, personally, attended.

Nevertheless, a few weeks later, when we started writing the script,it was agreed that in the first part of the show the kettle salesmen would be planted to explain the type of dinner Jack was hosting. From there on we pretty much followed the outline. In that fashion, the show went on the air. It wasn't bad -- but, on the other hand, it wasn't good. After the kettle salesmen were planted, the ending -- still twenty minutes away, was known and therefore no surprise.

A few years later we repeated the idea and, needless to say, the men and their kettles were neither heard nor seen until they came bursting out of the kitchen and launched into their sales pitch. This time, the reviews were excellent..fortunately.

Sometimes, while searching for an idea, we'd allow ourselves to get a little silly. Once we were trying to get a premise for the opening show of a new season -- the first broadcast after a seventeen-week summer hiatus. Knowing we had a listening audience whose loyalty caused them to anxiously await the Benny show's return to the air, I had a thought which I felt would not only work, but would cause a lot of talk. The suggestion was for us to do our first show of the season as if it was our second show -- do dialogue that referred to last week's opening show -- even read some made-up reviews, etc. The idea being to make our followers think they had missed our "phantom" opening show. Jack almost bought the gimmick, but we decided against it.

Throughout the years, because of his great feel for comedy, Jack had many basic ideas of his own which we were always happy to develope. When a writer is fortunate enough to work for a comedian who has comedy intelligence, it's foolhardy not to accept as many of his ideas as possible. If you can start writing your script based on something the star already likes, your job is half finished before one letter has hit the typewriter ribbon. The same holds for individual jokes...if they are good and fit into what you are trying to do. Believe me, he's not going to take your job and he'll be a lot more fun to work with.

A good example of this happened one day when Jack came into the office with a big smile on his face and said, "Fellows, I think it might be a funny idea if I wrote a corny song. We could do a lot of angles on my trying to get it published, etc."

We agreed. He then informed us he already had the title and with a twinkle in his blue eyes, he laid it on is: "When You Say I Beg Your Pardon, Then I'll Come Back To You." He not only said it unashamedly, but preceded it with a proud, "listen to this."

When we heard that title, we knew the song would be perfect for comedy. Knowing that his idea had our support, Jack said he wanted to reserve the writing of the lyrics for himself. He then went home and telephoned Mahlon Merrick, our musical conductor, and set him to work on a suitable melody. In a short while Mahlon's melody and Jack's lyrics were mated. Conception took place and two midwives put on their rubber gloves and brought forth into the world a musical abortion.

When it was ready to be "christened" on the air, we used a simple story: Jack heard that Hoagy Carmichael wrote a song called "Star Dust" and from that one effort made over $200,000.00. Convinced that he could do as well, Jack sat at the piano and with one groping finger tried to create a musical phrase to fit the lyric:

JACK: (SINGING ALONG ON SECOND TIME IT IS PLAYED) "SO MY DARLING..THOUGH WE'VE PARTED..SO MY DARLING..THOUGH WE'VE..(HIGHER NOTE) PARTED..No, it's better the first way..SO MY DARLING..THOUGH WE'VE PARTED...

At this point, Rochester entered.

ROCH: What are you doing, Mr. Benny?

JACK: I'm writing a song.

ROCH: You..you're writing a song?

JACK: Certainly.

ROCH: You're kidding.

JACK: What do you mean, kidding?..Song writing is a very dignified profession. If it wasn't, would they pay me two hundred thousand dollars for one song?

ROCH: Who's giving you two hundred thousand dollars?

JACK: Well, that's what they paid Hoagy Carmichael.

ROCH: But Hoagy Carmichael wrote "Star Dust". That's a classic.

JACK: Some classic..(MOCKING)..DA DA DA DA, DA DA, DA DA, DA DA, DA DA, DADADADADADADA. Two hundred thousand dollars for that?

Jack's parrot in her nearby cage starts to squawk and whistle.

JACK: Quiet, Polly. Now, Rochester, my song is all about a fellow who broke up with his sweetheart..and I've got the most wonderful title.

ROCH: What is it?

JACK: "When You Say I Beg Your Pardon, Then I'll Come Back To You." Isn't that beautiful?

ROCH: Oh, it'll ruin "White Christmas."

JACK: No, they're different types..I'll show you how it goes.

Over an amateurish introduction on the piano we hear Polly squawk and whistle again. Jack continues to play and then sings:

JACK: WHEN YOU SAY I BEG YOUR PARDON
THEN I'LL COME BACK TO YOU.
WHEN YOU ASK ME TO FORGIVE YOU..I'LL RETURN
(Now, get this next line..)
LIKE THE SWALLOWS AT SERRANO
RETURN TO CAPISTRANO
FOR YOU MY HEART WILL ALWAYS ALWAYS YEARN.

ROCH: Wait a minute, Mr. Benny..What are the swallows doing at Serrano?

JACK: I had to have a rhyme for Capistrano..Serrano is a little town in Italy.

ROCH: Well, how can the swallows come all the way from Italy back to Capistrano?

JACK: (MAD) I don't know. I can't have them come from Stockton..or Pismo Beach. I've got to make it rhyme. Now, Roch, you haven't heard the last part yet.. listen..
(SINGS) IF YOU SAY THAT YOU ARE SORRY
THEN I WILL UNDERSTAND.
NEATH THE HARVEST MOON, WE'LL PLEDGE OUR LOVE ANEW
(Now, Roch, here's where I'm stuck, but I'll get it)
SO MY DARLING, THOUGH WE'VE PARTED
COME BACK TO..COME BACK TO...
(Here's where I need a beautiful phrase)
COME BACK TO..

JACK: (CONT'D) (Oh, I've got it)

SO MY DARLING, THOUGH WE'VE PARTED,

COME BACK TO WHENCE..WE STARTED

ROCH: Whence!!

JACK: Yes, whence...It's the poetic form of "where".

Now, here's the finish,Roch..

SO MY DARLING, THOUGH WE'VE PARTED,

COME BACK TO WHENCE WE STARTED,

AND SWEETHEART, THEN I'LL COME BACK TO YOOOOOOOU.

....Well, Roch, what do you think of my song?

ROCH: I have the same opinion that Polly has.

JACK: Polly didn't say anything.

ROCH: No, but she just laid an egg.

JACK: What?

ROCH: I think that whence did the trick.

In the weeks, months, and years to follow, the song was the subject of many programs. It gave us a reason to have musical personalities, including some from the classical and symphonic world appear on the show as guest stars. When Jack would force his song on them, it was always greeted with non-acceptance and ridicule. This, of course, was always a great source of laughter.

However, there was one unexpected reversal to this hilarious situation. We were doing a show out of Palm Springs and had as our guests The Guadalajara Trio -- three Mexican musicians whose voices and strumming guitars were a fixture for many years at a quaint Palm Springs restaurant called The Doll House. Again, the

basic idea of the program was Jack getting the trio to sing his lousy song. As before, in writing the script, we ferreted out every comedy angle. However, in rehearsal, when the trio sang the song, the comedy evaporated. By some quirk, the lyrics of this corny song: "When You Say I Beg Your Pardon, Then I'll Come Back To You"--etc. sung in Spanish to the strumming of guitars, became absolutely beautiful. Realizing that at the end of such a glorious rendition, it made no sense to poke fun, we changed the script to properly treat Jack and his song in their unexpected hour of triumph.

CHAPTER XVIII

Fortunately, for a comedy writer, ideas for shows, routines, or jokes come from everywhere. Everything has a humorous angle. Sometimes it's right on the surface waiting to be plucked -- other times you have to dig for it. But if you dig deep enough, you'll find it. Rarely do you come up with a dry hole. You never know what, or who, will do or say something that will spark you into funny thoughts.

For example, one Sunday morning a friend of mine whom I hadn't seen in a long while was visiting me at the studio during rehearsal. He told me about his new apartment -- how his wife had redecorated it and it was now very modren.(That's right "modren") Of course, he meant "modern", but as he talked, he kept pronouncing it "modren". I didn't let on to him, but each time he said the word, I could see humorous possibilities.

In a few minutes the rehearsal started. In that very show we had written a routine in which Mel Blanc played the

part of a clerk in a bakery shop. In the script, Jack was taking a walk and found himself in front of the bakery, looking in the window and commenting, "Oh boy, look at those nice-looking cakes and pastries. I think I'll go in and buy something."

He opened the door with its tinkly bell and was greeted by the slightly mooley clerk:

CLERK: Yes, sir..what can I do for you?

JACK: Well, I don't know -- everything looks so good.. What do you recommend?

CLERK: Well, we got pies, cakes, doughnuts, brownies and cinnamon rolls.

JACK: Well, I don't want any of these -- Oh, I know, have you got any lady fingers?

CLERK: I used to have, but I had to get rid of 'em, they kept cracking their knuckles.

They continued the routine as written for a few more jokes, but the minute I heard Mel read the line, "We got pies, cakes, doughnuts, brownies and cinnamon rolls", I thought it would be funny if the clerk, played by Mel Blanc, would mispronounce "Cinnamon Rolls" and call them "Cimeron Rolls".

When they finished rehearsing the scene, I told Jack about making the change of this one word -- "Cinnamon" to "Cimeron". Jack agreed that it could be funny, so we quickly rewrote the routine. Here is the way it went on the air.

(SOUND: DOOR OPENS AND BELL TINKLES)

CLERK: (SLIGHTLY MOOLEY) Yes, sir -- what can I do for you?

JACK: Well, I don't know, everything looks so good -- What do you recommend?

CLERK: Well, we got pies, cakes, doughnuts, brownies and CIMERON ROLLS.

JACK: What?

CLERK: CIMERON ROLLS.

JACK: Don't you mean cinnamon rolls?

CLERK: That's what I said -- CIMERON ROLLS.

JACK: Well, I don't want any of those. Oh, I know -- have you got any lady fingers?

CLERK: I used to have some, but I had to get rid of 'em. They kept cracking their knuckles.

JACK: Don't be so smart. Now let's see..I'll have half a dozen doughnuts, that chocolate cake.. and on second thought -- (Here Jack decided to accept something he couldn't change) -- I think I'll have some of those -- er -- CIMERON ROLLS.

CLERK: What?

JACK: I said I'll have some of those CIMERON ROLLS.

CLERK: Don't you mean cinnamon rolls?

JACK: Yes, yes, give me six of them. How much is it?

CLERK: Let's see, doughnuts, cake and a half a dozen CIMERON ROLLS --

Completely confused,Jack paid the clerk and left the store.

I cite this incident to show how the change of one word -- "cinnamon" to "CIMERON" -- gave us a whole different routine. And that wasn't the end of it.

The next week we were doing a sketch where Jack was in a hotel room and had called down for room service.

(SOUND: KNOCK ON DOOR)

JACK: Come in.

(SOUND: DOOR OPENS)

MEL: (MOOLEY) Duh, did you call for room service?

JACK: Yes -- I want some breakfast -- Orange juice, coffee and -- er -- let's see, what can I have with the coffee?

MEL: Well, we have toast, English Muffins, doughnuts and CIMERON ROLLS.

JACK: What?

MEL: CIMERON ROLLS.

JACK: Look, waiter -- it's pronounced CINNAMON.

MEL: That's what I said -- CIMERON.

JACK: Oh, never mind -- bring me some orange juice, coffee, and a CIMERON ROLL.

MEL: Okay, and you're lucky. Yesterday I couldn't have brought you any CIMERON ROLLS.

JACK: Why not?

MEL: We were out of cinnamon.

JACK: All right -- just go and get it.

Well, so far, out of that one little word change we got two routines. And there was still life in it. A week later, we did a show using a story line requiring the entire cast to be at Jack's house. About fifteen minutes into the show there was a knock on the door. Jack excused himself to go answer it.

(SOUND: FOOTSTEPS..DOOR OPENS)

MEL: (MOOLEY) Duh,hello, Mr. Benny.

JACK: Oh, the man from the bakery shop.

MEL: Yeah, I got the stuff that you ordered -- some doughnuts, chocolate cake, some pastry and a half dozen CIMERON ROLLS.

JACK: Hmm..you still can't pronounce it, can you? Look, it isn't CIMERON, it's CINNAMON. Now let me ask you something. Maybe it will help you pronounce it. How are these rolls made?

MEL: Well, you take some flour..sugar..eggs..and.. and..do you want to know all the INGREDIMENTS?

JACK: No, no, it isn't INGREDIMENTS -- it's INGREDIENTS. Yes, I want to know all of them.

MEL: Well, there's flour, eggs, shortening and CINNAMON.

JACK: That's it, that's it..Now take your time. Let me hear you say it.

MEL: INGREDIENTS.

JACK: I don't mean INGREDIENTS --I'm trying to get you to say CIMERON -- I mean CINNAMON.

MEL: Why don't you order something else. You drive me nuts.

JACK: All right, just give me the stuff..Thanks.. Goodbye.

MEL: Goodbye.

(SOUND: DOOR CLOSES, FOOTSTEPS)

MARY: Jack, who was that?

JACK: Oh, that silly guy from the bakery -- the fellow who insists upon saying CIMERON ROLLS. Well, here you are, kids. You can have some of these with your coffee. They're nice and fresh and --

MARY: Wait a minute, Jack, he's right.

JACK: What do you mean, he's right?

MARY: Look at this label on the box -- "These are genuine CIMERON ROLLS named after J. P. Cimeron, founder of the Cimeron Baking Co."

JACK: What?

MARY: "These CIMERON ROLLS should not be confused with ordinary cinnamon rolls." Well, Jack, I guess that will hold you.

JACK: Hold me, nothing. That silly guy had that label printed himself just because he can't say cinnamon. He must be crazy.

ROCH: Well, boss, there's one way of finding out.

JACK: How?

ROCH: Ask him if he showers with a peeled potato.

I know that last line of Rochester's must be confusing, so let me explain. For three consecutive broadcasts the "CIMERON ROLLS" provided us with comedy. It made the writing task easier and, from the audience reaction, also very satisfying. The biggest laugh of the final routine came when Jack indicated that the man from the bakery must be crazy and Rochester, suggesting a way to find out, said, "Ask him if he showers with a peeled potato."

I'm sure you are asking, "Why?" and thinking the line makes no sense. And you are correct. Out of context, it means absolutely nothing. That "Peeled potato" line is the payoff of a writing technique called the "running gag" or "Playback" which was a trademark of the Benny Show. It was a device which was rarely, if ever, successfully done on any other show. It was simply a matter of doing a joke in the early part of the show, referring to it once or twice at intervals during the show and then paying it off near the end. For example, in the case of showering with a peeled potato, here is how it started and progressed:

(SOUND: SHOWER WATER ON)

JACK: (SINGING) OH, WHAT A BEAUTIFUL MORNING
OH, WHAT A BEAUTIFUL DAY
I'VE GOT A WONDERFUL FEELING
THAT EVERYTHING'S GOING MY WAY.

(SOUND: SHOWER WATER OFF)

Rochester, I'm through showering. Hand me a towel, please.

ROCH: Here you are.

(SOUND: SHOWER DOOR OPENS AND CLOSES)

JACK: Rochester, I don't know where you are buying soap lately, but that new bar I just used didn't lather at all.

ROCH: I didn't know you took a new bar of soap. Did you get it out of the service closet?

JACK: No, I found it in the kitchen.

ROCH: In the drawer?

JACK: No, in a dish near the drainboard.

ROCH: Well, congratulations, boss.

JACK: Why?

ROCH: You have just showered with a peeled potato!

The above routine happened on page two of the script. On page five Mary came over to the house, Rochester let her in and Jack, waiting for breakfast at the time, greeted her with:

JACK: Oh, good morning, Mary.

MARY: Hello, Jack. You know, it's so early I thought you'd still be in bed.

JACK: I've already taken my shower. Rochester, how about breakfast?

ROCH: Coming up.

JACK: Mary, would you care for something to eat?

MARY: No thanks, I'm not hungry.

JACK: You know, you look kinda cute this morning. You really do..How about a kiss?

MARY: Okay.

(SOUND: KISS)

MARY: Hmm..that's funny.

JACK: What?

MARY: I just said I wasn't hungry and now I've got a craving for potatoes.

ROCH: (SLIGHTLY OFF) Well, we've got the cleanest ones in town.

MARY: What?

JACK: Rochester, just make my breakfast.

MARY: Wait a minute, Jack..What is Rochester talking about?

JACK: All right, I'll tell you. This morning when I was taking a shower, I thought I picked up a cake of soap, but it turned out to be a peeled potato. It could happen to anybody.

Mary, of course, didn't accept Jack's claim that, "It could happen to anybody," and supported her case with several humorous remarks which pointed up mistaking a peeled potato for a bar of soap could only happen to Jack Benny. To review, the original incident of the shower, coupled with the above play-back with Mary set the stage for Rochester telling Jack, since they all happened on the same show, if he wanted to find out if the man from the bakery shop was crazy, all he had to do was to ask him if he showered with a peeled potato. This play-back technique was a vital part of most all our programs.

This brings to mind a radio broadcast we did with a man who at the time was California's governor, Goodwin Knight. The Governor was our guest star and was not too familiar with our "play-back format". I recall how during the broadcast he was doing a routine with Jack, reading from his script and getting very nice laughs. A little later, he read another line which got audience reaction. This surprised the Governor and he promptly ad libbed, "Jack, I don't understand that at all."

Jack, looking up from his script said, "Keep going." They continued with the spot and on the next page the Governor

had a line that referred to the line that had confused him earlier and it received a tremendous laugh.

Jack, looking up from his script again and gesturing with his hands ad libbed, "You see, you see, Governor -- you see how it all ties in?"

Yes, our scripts did "tie in". Not just throughout a single program, but from week to week and even from season to season.

CHAPTER XIX

Scripts for our radio shows were never written ahead. The first part of each week found the writers staring at blank pieces of paper. The only thing we tried to settle in advance was the story line. Usually, this would be done during the free hours of Saturday and Sunday rehearsals. If we failed to reach a decision, it meant that Monday, our day off, must be devoted to this task. We tried very hard to keep this from happening.

I recall one weekend at the studio the writers spent much time together and separately, thinking, thinking, thinking, "What can we do for next week's program?" Just before going on the air we had a final meeting, and not one of us had a workable idea. Resigned to working Monday, we were very glum as we sat in the control room listening to the current program go out over the air. It was a good show, but there was nothing in it we could

grab onto and carry over into the next week. The program was rapidly coming to the end. The orchestra was playing the theme and Don Wilson, radio's award-winning announcer, was giving the final plug for the sponsor's product, Lucky Strike Cigarettes. All Don had to say was a simple phrase, "Remember, be happy -- go Lucky."..But when he came to it, he said, in stentorian tones, "Remember, be Lucky -- go happy."

In the control room the four writers, hearing Don's mistake, looked at each other and in one voice said, "That's it. That's it. That's what we'll do next week!"

We met Don as he walked off the stage and thanked him for giving us the idea for next week's script. He didn't know what we were talking about, and when we explained, his face flushed and with hurt pride found it hard to believe he could have done such a thing. However, that night when he heard the repeat broadcast, he was convinced.

The writers got their Monday off and the following Sunday the radio listeners heard a show concerning Don's being locked in a closet by Jack with orders to keep repeating, "Be happy -- go Lucky." a thousand times until he learned how to say it right. Each time that closet door opened, we heard Don vocally grinding away.

Mistakes cannot be planned -- they have to honestly happen. Once we were doing a routine where Don was telling the audience some gossip about Jack. When Jack asked Don how he knew all those things, Don was supposed to say, "I read it in Drew Pearson's column." Drew Pearson was a Washington reporter and

his name was very well-known. However, on the air, when Jack asked the question, Don answered, "I read it in Drear Poosen's column."

Jack, of course, jumped in and for the next four or five minutes kept referring to Drear Poosen to the delight of the audience.

In a scene later in the show we had Frank Nelson playing the part of a doorman. Well, in light of Don's mistake and Jack's not letting it go, I left the booth, went to Frank who was waiting in the wings and made a change in his routine. Several minutes later when Jack, as was written in the script, said, "Oh, Mister...Mister..", Frank responded with his customary, "Yesssssssss."

Jack then asked, "Are you the doorman? "

Frank hit him with, "Who do you think I am in this uniform, Drear Poosen?"

When Jack heard Frank's new, unexpected line, he laughed louder than anyone in the audience.

In the mistake-making department, Mary was the leader. When she made a mistake on the air -- and she frequently did -- we would follow up the next week with a scene pertaining to it. If not a scene, at least some reference to it. I don't know why, but she was susceptible to mixing things up. Such as, in a restaurant she once ordered a Chiss Sweeze sandwich. Another time she was supposed to say that someone had wax on his shoes. Mary read the line saying the person had wax on his head. Another time she was telling about her car which was up on a grease rack.

But did she say that? No sir, she said her car was up on a grass reek. After this particular mistake, Jack really teased her about what she had said, and, of course, the more he carried on, the louder the audience laughed.

The following week we were doing a show from Palm Springs and all through the fore part of the broadcast, Jack had fun with Mary's mistake of the week before. He kept saying that there was no such thing as a grass reek. The louder the audience laughed, the more Jack chided her.

It so happened our guest that week was the Palm Springs Chief of Police. When he came on the show, Jack asked him about the kind of calls the police in that area would get. The Chief then told about a call they had only last night. A woman called in saying that two skunks were fighting on her front lawn. The Chief added that by the time he got there, "Boy, did that grass reek." With that one line he vindicated Mary and from then on Jack was the underdog. Actually, this is very similar to what we did with the previously mentioned Cimeron Rolls.

We were able to cash in on these mistakes because they actually happened. Jack was a stickler for believability. I remember once we wrote a routine about Jack practicing a balloon dance on the idea he was going out on personal appearances. When he read the routine, he said, "Fellows, this is very funny, but I don't want to do it." As we silently sat there waiting for his reason, he continued. "I don't want to do it because I'm not going out on any personal appearance. However, I am going to do some personals in about two months, so we'll do this routine just before I go. We saved the routine and did it at

the later date, and his earlier comment about it being very funny was verified.

Jack Benny's appreciation for comedy material was unsurpassed. He hated to see anything that was good wasted. Many times after final rehearsal the show would be two or three minutes too long. The writers would suggest several places where isolated jokes could be deleted to make up the time, and Jack would invariably say, "Those are all good jokes. Why take them out?" He would then cut a complete routine that had played very well in the rehearsal, explaining, "This will give us the time we need and now we have a great routine which we'll save and put in another show."

Jack's attitude was the opposite of most comedians. On other shows it was standard procedure that any material, no matter how good it might be, if it's cut for time, there is no chance of it ever being used again. Other comedians would take the attitude that these jokes were now used material. Now actually, this is bad enough, but some even go further. They'll start rehearsals with cast and crew laughing at all the jokes. Three days later -- same cast -- same crew -- same jokes -- and unfortunately, same comic -- but no one's laughing. At this point the comic sends for the writers and demands all new jokes. He is unable to figure out the reason the cast and crew stopped laughing is because they had heard the jokes fifty times. So, the obedient writers hurry back to the office, first making a stop in the mens' room to throw up, and a few hours late, the comic gets what he asked for -- new, but weaker jokes. And that's what goes on the air.

Eddie Cantor had a standard remark when his writers would present him a strong, but unused joke that had been only cut for time -- "Fellows, I pay new money. I want new jokes." Humorous? Yes. Did it make sense? No.

Writing for Jack was always a pleasure, even though, like most of us, he had his moods. There were many times he was visibly upset, but you rarely ever saw him mad. Ond of these rare occasions had to do with Rochester. Roch, for reasons known only to himself, got into a habit of being late for rehearsals. This went on for several weeks until one day Jack came to the writers and said, "Fellows, do me a favor and write Rochester out of the next few shows. Then when he asks why, I'll just tell him because he's always late for rehearsal."

The writers, out of selfishness, hated to leave Roch off any show because his routines were always a joy to the audience and the delivery of the jokes written for him was promptly rewarded with big laughs. With this in mind, we convinced Jack to keep him on the show and further convinced him that Rochester, in all probability, would not be late anymore.

The next Saturday morning Jack, the entire cast, the writers, the producer, the sound man, the engineer, the musical arranger, the script girl and anyone else connected with the program gathered at the studio at the appointed hour. Yes, everyone was there. That is, everyone but Rochester. We waited five minutes, we waited ten minutes and after fifteen minutes, Jack, seeing me and my writer colleagues standing behind the protective glass of the control room, got up off his chair, angrily crossed the stage, stepped up to the door of the control room, threw it

open and looking directly at the four of us said, "You see, you see, I told you he'd be late again. I shouldn't have listened to you guys."

With that, he tried to slam the control room door in our faces. I say, tried, because the open door had one of those door-check appliances which made slamming it impossible. On the first attempt, because of this mechanical resistance, his hand slipped off the door. On the second attempt, his hand slipped off again. On the third attempt the same thing happened. At this turn of events, he suddenly realized that neither he nor anyone else was going to slam that door, and then promptly slid down the wall and sat on the floor laughing.

At this point Rochester entered the hallway, stepped over Jack, then turned and said, "Boss, instead of just sitting there on the floor, we better start this rehearsal."

At Rochester's remark, Jack's laughter accelerated into near hysteria. The next week and again for reasons best known to himself, Rochester started coming to rehearsals on time.

A facet of the Jack Benny character which was perhaps the best-known and most-quoted was his age -- thirty-nine. Actually, it came about accidentally. In 1944 my partner, Sam, and I were working on our half of the script and we thought it might be funny for Jack, who was at the time fifty-two years old, to claim he was younger than he really was. The subject of age was initiated in this manner:

The radio broadcast was interrupted by a knock on the door. Jack responded, as usual, with a cheery, "Come in." We heard the door open and the voice of a reporter, played by Mel Blanc, said:

"Mr. Benny?"

"Yes."

"I'm from Esquire Magazine. We're doing a story about you and have all the information in our files except one thing."

"What would you like to know?"

"Your age, please".

Though Jack had a head of silver-gray hair, his reply came without hesitation, "Thirty-six."

The reporter found this hard to believe and responded, "...But....Well, Okay." Then he turned and left to the sound of the closing door.

In the script the above incident took place on page four. On page seven, which was really much further into the show because of a musical number, there was another knock on the door. Again Jack answered it with, "Come in."

The reporter entered for a second time, saying, "Mr. Benny, I'd like to try it again."

"Again?"

"Yes, I'm from Esquire Magazine..We're doing a story about you and have all the information in our files except one thing."

"What would you like to know?"

"Your age, please."

"I told you, I'm thirty-six."

".....Mr. Benny, this information isn't going to be printed. It's only for our private files."

"I don't care what it's for..I'm thirty-six!"

Having made the second attempt, the reporter accepted the results, saying, ".....But.....Well, okay." He then exited again to the sound of a closing door.

In the final scene of the broadcast, Jack was home with Rochester who had just stepped out into the kitchen to make some toast and tea. At the sound of the front door buzzer, Jack called, "I'll get it, Rochester."

He then walked to the door and opened it. It was the reporter again, giving it a third try.

"Mr. Benny, I'm from Esquire Magazine. We're doing a story on you, and --"

Jack cut in with,"I know, I know."

"Well, look, Mr. Benny, now that you're in the privacy of your own home, and away from those microphones, tell me... just how old are you?"

Jack, still insistantly calm, repled, "I told you -- I'm thirty-six."

The reporter, frustrated, began to sob, "Look, Mr. Benny, I've got a job to do, and I've got to go back to my editor with the facts -- the facts. And when I tell him that, he'll never believe me...I'll be the laughing stock of the office --I don't care about myself. I've got a wife and two children!"

With the reporter almost hysterical, Jack persisted, "Look, bud, I told you, I'm -- "

"You can whip me, kick me, beat me, but tell me the truth! Think of my wife and kids..tell me the truth..That's all I want, THE TRUTH...THE TRUTH...Mr. Benny, how old are you?"

"Well, if it will save your job, I'll tell you the truth... I'm thirty-seven."

"Thirty-seven!"

"Yes."

The reporter, at wit's end, slowly made his way to the door, mumbling, "I'll try it, I'll try it..that's all I can do." Then, sobbing hysterically, "Maybe they'll believe me, I hope so, I hope so."

Jack, closing the door, commented, "What an emotional young man."

This is the factual story of how and when the age routines got started. For the next few years, Jack would have his birthdays and, since we always celebrated them on the air, we would advance his radio age one year -- from thirty-six to thirty-seven.. from thirty-seven to thirty-eight..from thirty-eight to thirty-nine.. from thirty-nine to -- Yes, we almost did it, but Jack, himself, (who was now fifty-six) said, "Fellows, we've got to stop at thirty-nine. When a person says he's forty years old, there is something about that number that isn't funny."

So, from that moment on and for the rest of his career, Jack Benny contended he was only thirty-nine years old. And working with him through those years, I'm convinced he really was and never grew older.

In the first five years of my association with Jack, my travels were confined to the United States -- not counting a week in British Columbia and a Sunday afternoon in Tiajuana. However, in late spring of 1948 Jack signed to do a stage show at the famous London Palladium and he asked me and Sam to go with him to England.

This, of course, was for the purpose of working, but when it's your first trip to Europe on the luxury liner Queen Elizabeth, pleasure begins to sneak in. We would be in London for approximately three weeks. When the Palladium engagement was over, we were to spend an additional three weeks sight-seeing through Europe.

When Jack told me this, I thought "all this and heaven, too." "Heaven, too" meaning all expenses were covered and, in addition, we would be paid. Oh, what a wonderful thing this would be! Suddenly, my ecstasy vanished. I had a problem that was really going to take some delicate handling. I decided the only thing to do was to meet it head on.

When I got home, I told Ada Marie about the up-coming European trip. She hung onto every detail, even though she knew she would have to stay home because of her advanced case of pregnancy. She accepted the situation quite well. If she had gotten emotional about her condition, I was prepared to blurt out, "How could you do this to me?"..which, now that I think of it, doesn't sound right.

We did our last two radio shows of the season from Cleveland, Ohio, with Bob Hope, and from New York City with Fred Allen. On the night of July 2nd, Jack, Mary, Phil, his wife, Alice Faye, and myself boarded the Queen Elizabeth. At approximately ten o'clock her Majesty's ship was tugged away from her berth and with her whistle breaking ear drums all the way to Philadelphia, she glided down the Hudson, past the Statue of Liberty and out into the open sea.

Since Ada Marie was not there to see me off, I faced the general direction of Times Square and waved a sort of a farewell gesture to the Statue of Father Duffy and his pigeons. The next few hours of that first night were spent exploring the ship and learning that the first stop would be Cherbourgh, France. With this information in mind, I went to my stateroom and prepared for bed, but before turning off the light, I stuck my head out the porthole and shouted,"Lafayette, I am on my way."

Travel aboard ship is supposed to be relaxing, but I found the schedule rather hectic. I would get up about eight in the morning. After a quick shower and shave, I'd slip into a shipboard wardrobe and hurry to the main dining-room for breakfast. Breakfast on the Elizabeth is an eight-course meal and every bite was delightful. The only problem was you had to eat fast in order to get up to the Promenade Deck in time for mid-morning consomme which was always accompanied by a little cake or some other form of solid nourishment. While partaking of this repast, I had to keep looking at my watch because at twelve noon the dining room would be open for lunch. After an assortment of starters came a variety of salads and soups, followed by an array of entrees which, in total, added up to twice as much food as breakfast.

To save time, I adopted the English style of eating -- keeping my fork in my left hand and loading the back of it,using my knife as a pusher. But it was a losing battle. As I selected my dessert, it was time to leave the dining room to catch the two o'clock movie. I made my way to the ship's theatre just as the lights went out. Before proceeding to a seat, I waited for my eyes to adjust to the dark because it would be embarrassing to

trip over someone's feet -- especially when you have a chocolate eclair in your pocket. I figured I could eat it during the picture. It would take the place of popcorn.

The movie ran two hours, which permitted getting back on the Promenade Deck for afternoon tea and crumpets, after which, there would just barely be enough time to go to my stateroom to dress for dinner.

For the uninitiated, dinner aboard ship makes breakfast and luncheon look like appetizers. But, nevertheless, you cannot afford to dally or you might miss the last thing on your daily schedule -- the late snack in the main lounge.

The first day at sea I didn't miss a thing and before falling asleep I found that the porthole was a good place to throw the banana peels. At the end of the second day of the same kind of activity, I realized that this schedule could kill a person. I knew something had to be cut out, so on the third day I made my decision -- I cut out the movie.

The last night out many of the passengers refused to go to bed. We had been told at daybreak we would be able to see the shoreline of Europe. For most of us, this would be our first glimpse of foreign soil. After a long night, we gathered along the rail. With a sense of history in my heart and slits in my face called eyes, I watched the sun come up over the horizon to light up the coast of France. A few minutes later, the Elizabeth dropped her anchor and transferred to a tender those passengers whose destination was Cherbourgh. Before we knew it, the Queen was once more on her way. Next stop -- her home port, South Hampton, England.

Early in the afternoon, her Majesty's Ship docked into the slip. At the time, I couldn't help thinking, "If the banana peels I had tossed through the porthole had clung to the hull, it could have slipped into the dock." I know that's not very good, but what can you expect from someone who hadn't slept for thirty-six hours?

We continued our journey by train and several hours later checked into the Picadilly Hotel in London. Not wanting to waste a minute in this exciting city, I quickly changed my clothes and left for the theatre where I slept through a really smashing new play called "Edward My Son". As I walked out of the theatre, I heard the other patrons say it was excellent.

The next morning about nine, I awakened, refreshed but terribly hungry. My empty stomach was attributed to not having eaten dinner the night before. Though famished, I had enough strength to push the button for the hall porter. He took my breakfast order and, while waiting for his return, I submerged myself in the bathtub.

I had never seen such a big bathtub before, and after swimming three laps, I got out, dried myself, and was slipping into my clothes when I heard a light knock on the door. It was the porter with my breakfast. I checked the tray as he set it on the table and it was exactly what I had ordered -- an omelette, sausage, toast and coffee. It looked so good I felt I should express my appreciation by way of a tip. Idon't know whether I gave the porter a twopence, a thruppence, a ha'penny or a 'alf crown, but he seemed happy as he left the room.

I quickly sat down and with fork in hand, I paused for one last look at what was the most beautiful breakfast I'd ever seen. It had the most radiant colors. I didn't know whether to eat it or hang it on the wall under a small light. I don't know how to describe it to you except to say, "If Gainsborough ever painted a picture of an omelette, this omelette looked exactly the way he'd have painted it!" And if he had done so, I'm sure that today, displayed in art museums all over the world and hanging right next to his "Blue Boy" would be Gainsborough's "Yellow Omelette".

My hunger of the moment outweighed my art appreciation, so I plunged my fork into the masterpiece and placed a portion of it in my mouth. It made contact with my taste buds and, quicker than you can say "Jack the Ripper", my bite size portion of the omelette was really on the wall -- evenly distributed by the force of my rejecting tongue. Or, in fewer words, it was awful. I have no dea what the ingredients were, but by the taste of this omelette, the chef must have taken the contents of a pencil sharpener, blended it with one jigger of Elmer's glue, achieved the bright yellow color by dipping it into the juice of a boiled rain slicker, then gave it a light airy texture by blowing it up with a bicycle pump.

I couldn't bring myself to taste the sausage because they were link and I wasn't sure to what or to whom they were linked. On the assumption that coffee is coffee, I poured myself a cup. As I sat there waiting for it to cool, I was aware that it looked awfully strong. This assessment was proven correct a moment later

when I inadvertently knocked the filled cup to the floor. The china broke in a hundred pieces, but the coffee retained its cup-shape and bounced around before finally coming to rest in the middle of the room.

There was no question in my mind what to do. I was going to send back the omelette and the sausage, but the coffee I would keep, figuring that at some later date, I could slice it up and have new heels put on my shoes.

Seriously, though, (I say that for those who think I haven't been) there is an explanation for this first London breakfast experience. Even though the war had been over for three years, the wounds of the conflict were still apparent and England remained in a period of austerity. The people were having to, as they say, "make do" and food was still very much a problem. When I bit into the omelette, it was my taste buds' first encounter with powdered eggs. On the theory that if it looked good, it will taste good, large amounts of food coloring were added. At first I thought the flourescent appearance was for early risers who wanted to eat in the dark. I'm sure, nutritionally speaking, it was more than adequate. Perhaps, after four days spent consuming the food served aboard ship, I had over-reacted.

A day or so later, I was discussing my experience with an English gentleman, and when I finished, he looked furtively in one direction and then the other. He then handed me a card and whispered, "Take this." On the back was written the address of a place located in an alley up over a garage, where you could get a breakfast of fresh eggs.

Early the next morning I arrived at the address, walked up the stairs and knocked on the door. From inside a voice said, "Yes?"

I leaned over and whispered through the keyhole, "Two, over easy, with a side of bacon".

The door opened just wide enough for me to enter, then quickly closed. I think the reason for this being if the aroma emanating from the frying pans ever leaked out into the city, the drooling of the palace guards would shrink their uniforms. I guess a proper name for this place that was serving fresh eggs would be a "Breakfast Easy". Or, since they burnt my toast, a Black Market.

You might be prompted to ask, as I was, with food conditions so bad at home, why was the Queen Elizabeth serving such fantastic multiple-course meals? The answer really made much sense. The ship was a business venture, bringing dollars and other foreign currency into the country and was, therefore, purposely made as attractive as possible.

Jack's appearance at the London Palladium was reviewed as a smashing success. It had been seventeen years since his last London engagement and the audiences were glad to have him back.

When an American goes to England, you would think that there would be no problem understanding one another -- and generally that is true. However, there are a few areas in which there is a language barrier. For instance, in referring to Jack's tight, miserly character, we couldn't call him cheap. Over there, the word for cheap is "mean". So on the stage, the jokes referred to how "mean" he was. Also, it was rather shocking for me,

during my first few days there, to be coming in at night and overhear the hall porter say to two women who were about to enter their room, "Ladies, what time in the morning do you want to be knocked up?" And it was even more surprising when they gave him a specific minute.

One thing that has always impressed me is how the English have managed to be so concise in their almost frugal use of words, especially in signs giving direction or warning. This brings to mind an incident when I was riding on a sightseeing bus in London. With me was Frank Remley, the guitar player. Shortly after we had taken our place on the bus, he pointed to a sign attached to an overhead luggage rack. It said, "Mind your head when rising from the seat". I then leaned over to Rem and said, "You know, Frankie, in Greece, they have signs that say, 'Mind your seat when rising from the head'."

When the London engagement ended, Jack, Mary, Phil, Alice, Frankie, my partner, Sam, and his wife, Peggy, and I all started on a tour of several other European countries. When we got to Paris, I had to leave them because of a commitment I had made many months earlier in Los Angeles. I had to get home to Ada Marie who, having already given me a daughter, Bonnie, was now going to present me with a son.

On August 14, I left Paris by train and from Cherbourgh, France, started my return journey to California via Queen Elizabeth, 20th Century Ltd., and Super Chief.

On September 3, 1948, our new baby was born. Two weeks later she was christened Judith Ann Balzer. Yes, I told you I

was expecting a boy, but when you have someone making something for you, you've got to stick around or they lose parts.

CHAPTER XX

Writers on the Benny staff were in a very envious position. The working conditions were superb. If, perchance, you had a few days in which your creative juices were not flowing very well, your efforts, at least, were always appreciated. Along with the good pay, we enjoyed several other fringe benefits. I, personally, had an extra one that topped the list; namely, automobiles. In 1947 I bought my first Cadillac -- a beautiful red convertible. It wasn't new, but on the other hand,it wasn't used, either. It originally belonged to Mary Livingstone. Though she had it two years, the speedometer registered less than two thousand miles, and most of these were put on by the handyman driving in and out of the garage for washing and polishing. Mary's only reason for selling was she had it two years and it was automatically time to buy a new one. I had the advantage of that situation for the next six years. I think I'm the only person to buy used cars and have the speedometer turned <u>forward</u> so people would believe it.

Eventually, I bought my own brand new Cadillac just so I could have the thrill of owning a speedometer with seven zeros on it.

In the Post-World War II years there was another fringe benefit which ran rampant in the broadcasting industry. It was known as the free plug or Payola, and was a very simple operation. Brand names of products manufactured by companies other than the show's sponsor were smoothly, but not always cleverly, worked into the dialogue of the script. In this way, listeners to the Lucky Strike Program, the company who paid the bill for the talent and the air time, heard, of course, the Lucky Strike commercials, but they also heard mentions of Coca Cola, Dad's Old Fashioned Root Beer, Bendix washing machines, Mix-Master and a whole string of other electrical appliances, plus the brand names for every liquor imaginable. Connections were also made with hotels and vacation resorts.

This hitch-hike type advertising was handled by men who set up bastard advertising agencies. They would go to a manufacturer or distributor who had little or no radio budget to promote his product. They would explain to them that for a very few dollars an arrangement could be made to have their product on top-rated shows on the national networks. Having made a deal, the agent would then go to the writers, promising them a case of booze or something of equivalent value for each plug. Many times, the pay-off would be the product,itself--a washing machine, a dryer, mixer, toasters, watches, vacuum cleaners, razors, etc. Some writers had a preference in their plugs. They would plug what would plug in. On some shows, the writers were so prolific you could hardly tell which product was the plug and which was the

real sponsor. A few writers became so adept at this they filled their garages with booze and electrical appliances, much of which was later turned into cash.

Why, I will never know, but the Benny writers felt that we were above such nefarious goings on. After a few years of this high and mighty attitude, we, too, became participants in the plug game. It all came about quite by accident. We had never tasted the plug benefits, but decided we would use the public's knowledge of these avaricious activities as a source of humor. On one Sunday evening broadcast, with only the joke in mind, we did the following dialogue:

ROCH: Oh, boss, I didn't know you were coming home. Sit down and relax. I'll go fix your dinner.

JACK: Thanks, Rochester, but I'm so tired I don't think I'll eat dinner. I think I'll go right to bed.

ROCH: Well, okay, I'll run upstairs and turn on your General Electric Blanket.

JACK: Rochester, I don't have a General Electric Blanket.

ROCH: You do now, boss.

The audience, knowing what was meant by that, rewarded us with a very nice laugh. As far as we, the writers, or anyone else on the Benny Show were concerned, that was the end of it. However, the next morning, the office phone rang and a voice on the other end, representing General Electric Blankets said, "How many?" Between the words "How" and "Many" the supercilious attitude about plugs evaporated and from that moment on, because of this accidental indoctrination, we not only got our blankets from

General Electric, but from other plugs that made their appearance starting the next week, we got washing machines, dryers, mixers, toasters, watches, vacuum cleaners, razors and anything else that was acceptable for our kind gesture. Sometimes, the plugs were not specific, but were of an institutional nature, such as if you did a joke in which you used the word scotch or bourbon without any brand name, it was considered a plug because it promoted the two products in a general way.

Plugs were not confined to products that you could use or drink. They even reached into the area of hotels and resorts where a writer, for a nice mention, could take his family for a week-end or a whole week at no charge.

Writers also reaped the benefits of the non-plug. In the non-plug category was the maker of one of America's favorite soft drinks. Every week they delivered to our homes two cases of their product. For this, we did not have to mention the name of this thirst-quencher. Our only obligation was to refrain from mentioning the product names of their competitors. Receiving this non-mentioning award, I felt like one of those farmers who for years were paid for not growing. This worked so well with a soft drink, I tried to make the same deal with a company that made champagne. Failing that, I tried to convince the soft drink people that there were some broadcasts on which we didn't mention their competitor several times; therefore, the non-mentioning reward should be increased. I almost had them convinced.

The extra benefits of working on the Benny Show should certainly include travel. Besides the European trips, the travel

within the United States was always exciting. Not only because of the people you traveled with,but the conditions were so great. During the radio years our trips from coast to coast were pretty much confined to the train. However, in those years travel by train was luxurious -- The Chief, the Super Chief, the Twentieth Century or Broadway Limited to New york. Also, the Lark, which was one of the country's great trains, ran between between Los Angeles and San Francisco. On many occasions the traveling show would mean a group of from twenty to twenty-five people. In return for our generous on-the-air comments about the Santa Fe Railroad, the western division of Santa Fe would furnish cocktails and dinner going out and the eastern division would furnish the same from the half-way point on into Chicago. This would all be in addition to the fresh trout which was put on special at LaJunta, Colorado, by the railroad and the barbecued spareribs put on by Rochester in Kansas City. No matter what the month or date, our train trips were always like a three-day New Year's Eve.

Working for Jack gave us something else which is very important to a writer or, for that matter, to anyone. We had security. We had contracts for varying lenghts of time -- one, two, or three years -- but they were really only a legal formality. I think the following incident will best exemplify this.

In the fall of 1948 the business agents and the Columbia Broadcasting System were involved in many, many meetings to negotiate a deal for Jack to leave N.B.C. and move over to C.B.S.

This went on for months and toward the end, Jack attended the sessions, himself. I recall very vividly his returning to the office one day and saying to his writers, "Well, that takes care of that. Our show will soon be on C.B.S."

Upon hearing this, I said, "Jack, I hope you got a good deal."

"George," he said, "All I know is we will all be working for the next seven years."

When he said that, we knew that was the way it would be.

In mid-season, we moved from N.B.C. on the corner of Sunset and Vine to C.B.S. at Sunset and Gower. It was on January 2nd, 1949, we did our first radio broadcast over the C.B.S. Network. In making the move, Jack persuaded C.B.S. to hire George Foster, our audio engineer. George was a long-time employee of N.B.C. and had worked the Benny Show for many seasons. After the move to C.B.S., George remained with us until the day of his retirement.

Earlier in the middle Forties, Phil Harris and his wife, Alice Faye, were signed to head up their own program on N.B.C. The show was called "The Fitch Band Wagon" and was broadcast immediately following the Benny Show. While both shows were on N.B.C., this posed no problem. Phil would finish our show, then step down the hall to his own studio and go on the air. We always kept him out of the last page of our script so he could make the tight schedule.

This arrangement worked fine until the move from N.B.C. to C.B.S. Because the studios were a couple blocks apart, we could only use Phil in the first half of our show. So, for the next

two and a half years, Phil would read his last line and, without even waiting for the laugh, would drop his script and take off for N.B.C. We often kidded him about getting a police escort. By that, we meant he should hire two officers and run between their motor-cycles.

In 1952, Bob Crosby took Phil's place on the show, and for the next two years, it was Bob Crosby and his orchestra. However, this didn't change our writing. We still wrote degrading remarks about the leader, the musicians, and the music.

However, with Phil gone, one thing was now missing. We no longer had his warm-up performance for the studio audience when he would sing:

Won't you come with me to Alabammy.
Let's go see my dear old mammy,
She's fryin' eggs and broilin' hammy.
And that's what I like about the South.

There you can make no mistakey,
Where the nerves are never shakey,
You ought to taste that layer cakey,
And that's what I like about the South.

Here come old Bob with all the news,
Box-back coat and button shoes,
But he's all caught up with his union dues,
And that's what I like about the South.

Here come old Roy down the street.
Oh, can't you hear his shuffling feet,

He would rather sleep than eat,
And that's what I like about the South.

Did I tell you about the place called Doo Wah Ditty,
It ain't no town and it ain't no city,
Awful small and awful pretty
Doo Wah Ditty...etc., etc., etc.

This song, and I needn't tell you the title, was written by Phil with lyrical contributions from the fellows in the band. Those you have just read are only a small part of them, and as you see, they fill less than a page. The rest would fill a small library.

At the time of the change in networks, C.B.S, wanting to protect its investment, had had Jack's life insured for two million dollars. The Lucky Strike Commercials were not recorded, but done live, sometimes using as many as six or seven actors. Lucky Strike at that time was doing a sell in which they implored the cigarette-buying public to keep their eye on the red bull's eye. This command was repeated quickly three times and each time punctuated by the firing of a gun, followed by the sound of a bullet hitting a bell. This raucous commercial activity which weekly opened the show took place in a separate studio. When the commercial was finished, the Audio Engineer would then switch to Studio B for the entertainment part of the program. This pistol-shooting commercial and Jack's newly-acquired insurance policy gave me an idea for some humor which played early in the show and, during the remaining script, kept popping up in the Benny "play-back" tradition. It started on page four.

JACK: Rochester, I want you to drive me downtown to the Doctor's Office. I've got to go for a physical.

ROCH: What's the matter, boss? You feel bad?

JACK: No no..It's just that my sponsor is taking out an insurance policy on me and I have to be examined.

ROCH: How much is the policy for?

JACK: A million dollars..Then there's a double-indemnity clause in it. You know, if I'm killed accidentally, the sponsor collects two million dollars.

ROCH: Two million?

JACK: Yes.

ROCH: Boss..you better hope that guy keeps his eye on the red bull's eye.

JACK: Oh, you mean the commercial..I'm not worried about that. They shoot that gun in another studio way over on Sunset and Highland..and I don't even pass there on my way home.

ROCH: I know, but for two million dollars they can make a bullet that waits for you at Pico and Sepulveda.

JACK: What are you talking about? My sponsor is just trying to protect his investment, that's all.

Having a bullet that waits for you is humorous enough, but adding the streets Pico and Sepulveda made it double funny because it's not only a well-known intersection, but Pico and Sepulveda was also the name of a popular song.

On page 9, Jack was hurrying to leave the house when the phone rang. It was Don Wilson. He was with the Quartet and he

wanted Jack to hear a singing commercial they had prepared. In the last part of their silly lyrics, they used the sound effect of a gunshot and a bullet hitting a bell. After stopping them with his usual, "Wait a minute -- wait a minute -- wait a minute!", Jack continued:

JACK: ....Don...Don...why is it that they always start out so nice and then go crazy?...We can't use that commercial. It's too noisy.. Where did they get that gun?

DON: They found it on a bench at Pico and Sepulveda.

JACK: No!

DON: What's that, Jack?

JACK: Nothing, nothing..I'll see you at rehearsal.

(SOUND: RECEIVER DOWN)

JACK: Hmm..I thought Rochester was only guessing.

Later on page 13, while Rochester was driving Jack to his doctor's appointment:

(SOUND: LOUSY MOTOR)

JACK: Rochester, we're awfully late. Can't you go a little faster?

ROCH: Okay.

(SOUND: MOTOR FASTER)

JACK: You know, right after I take my physical, we'll go down to --

(SOUND: LOUD GUN SHOT)

JACK: Rochester..Rochester..they got me! They got me!

ROCH: Get back in the seat, boss, that was only a tire.

JACK: Oh..I should have known. We're only at Pico and Robertson.

(SOUND: CAR STOPS)

JACK: Rochester, you change the tire and I can walk to the doctor's office from here.

Near the end of the show on page 20, Dr. Nelson (played by Frank Nelson) and his assistant (played by Mel Blanc) were busy giving Jack his physical:

NELSON: Now, Mr. Benny, drink this glass of barium.

JACK: You mean all that white stuff?

NELSON: Yes..It's a harmless chemical and when you drink it, we can follow its course through the flouroscope.

JACK: Oh..all right...Gee, it tastes awful.

NELSON: Drink it all.

JACK: ....There.

MEL: Oh look, Dr. Nelson, the barium has reached the esophageal entrance....There it goes over the cricoid cartilage...behind the tracheal bifurcation... through the arch of the aorta..Now it's passing the esophageal hiatus.

JACK: If it passes Pico and Sepulveda, it's dead.

Writers of the Benny Show never had to write under pressure. Having a star like Jack Benny automatically eliminated the stress that comes from that area. The talent of the writing staff individually and as a whole through their ability to make things work alleviated most problems in that area. The only element left that writing staffs often find troublesome is time, and on only two

occasions did time ever become a factor.

One happened in Palm Springs when we were writing a show to be broadcast from Norton Air Force Base in San Bernardino. Dorothy Lamour was to be our guest star. In those days in the Springs, when we were supposed to be writing, our attention was either focused on getting a sun tan or maybe just thinking of Dorothy. On Saturday night we gathered up our newly-finished script and went to San Bernardino for a late rehearsal. As always at these rehearsals, the cast read the show from start to finish, only this time no one laughed. We were all aware of two things. Tomorrow, Sunday afternoon (a four o'clock broadcast for the east coast) Jack Benny would be saying "Hello again" to thirty million people, and from there on, neither he nor the cast had any material worth doing unless between now, 9 P.M. Saturday night,and air time the next day the writers could come up with something. To do this, we knew we would have to start writing a whole new script immediately.

With this task before us, Jack kissed Mary goodnight, the writers chewed points on their pencils and at 9 o'clock Sunday morning, the script girl typed up the final pages. We went on the air as scheduled and did the show to an enthusiastic audience of servicemen.

After the show Jack, Mary, the writers and the cast went to Dorothy Lamour's home for an Italian dinner, during which time we gathered around the radio and listened to the west coast re-broadcast. Under the circumstances, we were quite happy with a show that had been written in such a few hours.

When a script is written under such conditions, you tend to fill the time with bits and pieces. At one point, we even called upon Bob Ballin, our producer, to play the part of a monkey. The written material wasn't too well received, but the bit was saved when at the finish he ad libbed, "If my mother knew I was doing this, she'd kill me." And I'm sure she would have.

There was another time when we could very easily have reached Sunday morning without a script, and neither Jack, writers or cast were aware of it. One Saturday after rehearsal Jack and the writers departed and Jeanette, before going home,took her only copy of the re-written script to mimeo. Several hours later her phone rang. It was the mimeo department with a panic-filled question, "Where's the script?" When Jeanette explained she had delivered it to them several hours earlier, it was quickly concluded that someone in the mimeo department had inadvertently misplaced it, or worse yet had thrown it away. It was now late Saturday night and there was no script for the next day's broadcast. Without informing Jack or the writers, Jeanette, using mental recall, aided by a few sparse notes that were still in her briefcase, managed to reconstruct the entire program. The next morning the actors and the writers had the usual Sunday rehearsal, using the newly mimeographed scripts that were an exact reconstruction of the one that had disappeared. No one was aware of the frightening incident of the night before, and we perhaps would never have known if Jeanette hadn't mentioned it later in light conversation.

The tool of a writer is words. However, the fantasyland of human imagination varies considerably. Words do not always create the same picture in the mind of every reader or listener. This was also true of the four writers. Though we worked together and agreed on the words, there was a wide divergence when it came to the mental picture. I recall one time when this caused quite an argument.

The story line of our show for that week called for Jack to walk from his house down to the drugstore. One of the writers had a funny idea wherein Jack, on his way to the drugstore, would stop in front of Ronald Colman's house, and then proceed to go through the contents of Colman's trash barrel. I objected to this. My argument was that, in walking to the drug store, Jack would not pass the Colman's place because their house was on the other side of his. "Since when?", said the creator of the suggested trash barrel routine. I replied, "Since always. " And I supported my remark with, "The Colmans have always lived on the right hand side of Jack."

"No, no, the Colman's place is to the left of Jack's house." At this point a third writer said, "We can settle this whole argument very quickly. The drug store is down on the corner of Santa Monica and..."

"Wait a minute," I said. "The drug store is on Sunset Boulevard."

"Not the drug store I picture," said writer number four.

Suddenly the argument evaporated into laughter as the four of us almost simultaneously realized how utterly stupid this whole

discussion was. We were writing a radio show and it really made no difference as to the placement of houses, drugstores, streets, or even trash cans. The listeners, with their God-given imagination,will put everything in its proper place -- and in a manner that could not be surpassed. And it would all be done by just listening to words. I think this phenomenon was so well stated by the comment of a little girl who, after experiencing both the radio listening and television watching, said, "On radio, the pictures are prettier." In the golden years of radio, a flick of a switch ushered you to the best seat in the house in the theater of the mind.

CHAPTER XXI

The Benny Show rarely, if ever, used any outside material. As a matter of fact, I can only think of one comedy bit done on the show which didn't come from the writing staff -- and even then, it had to first have our accptance. At one of our rehearsals an actor named Ukie Sharon told Jack a bit and we did it on the show. Ukie played the part and here's how it went:

In our story it was Sunday and Jack decided to walk to the studio. While he was strolling down the street, he was approached by a strange man who said, "Pardon me, do you know how to get to the Public Library?"

Jack truthfully and apologetically answered, "No, no, I don't."

The man then quickly replied," Well, you go back to the corner, turn left, go three blocks, turn right for one block and it's right there on the corner -- You can't miss it."

Jack, after listening carefully, said, "Thank you. Thank you very much."

The stranger walked away and Jack turned around and started following the directions. After about ten steps he realized what had happened, saying, "Wait a minute -- I don't even want to go to the library."

The bit played well and we did it again a year or two later. The second time we followed it with a typical Dennis Day routine. Near the end of the program Dennis called on the phone and said, "Mr. Benny, I just noticed what time it is and I can't get there in time for the show."

Jack then bawled him out for not starting for the studio earlier.

"Oh," Dennis replied, "I left in plenty of time."

Jack asked, "Where are you now?"

"I'm at the Public Library."

"Dennis,did you run into a man---"

"Yeah, how did you know?"

"Never mind..And Dennis, you're lucky you're in a library or I'd make you sing your song over the phone."

Though our major contractual duty was to furnish the broadcast material, we were always available to write anything that Jack might need. One evening after a show, Jack and I were having a sandwich and he told me about a charity affair in New York where he'd been asked to appear. Because of his commitments in Hollywood,he wouldn't be able to be there in person, but he thought that maybe he could make a recording and send it back to be played to those in attendance. Naturally, it would

be something humorous and he asked me if I'd give it some thought. On the way home I got an idea and before going to bed, I wrote it down. The next morning I showed it to Jack. It pleased him and next time we were at the studio we made a record and sent it east. Using Jack's built-in cheap, parsimonious character, this is what we recorded:

(SOUND: WALKING FOOTSTEPS IN CORRIDOR)

JACK: Hm..If I didn't have to be here at the studio for my radio show tonight, I could be in New York at the Waldorf Hotel for that big benefit show. I think I'll call Mr. Thompson, the chairman and explain. I think there's a pay phone down this -- Yes, there it is, right over there.

(SOUND: STEPS, BOOTH DOOR OPENS AND CLOSES RECEIVER UP, DIME IN PHONE, THREE DIALS)

OPERATOR: Long Distance.

JACK: Operator, I'd like to speak to Mr. G. W. Thompson. He should be in the Grand Ballroom of the Waldorf-Astoria Hotel in New York City. This is Jack Benny.

OPERATOR: One moment, please.

JACK: (HUMMING LOVE IN BLOOM) Da da da da da..da da

OPERATOR: I have your party on the line.

JACK: (QUICKLY) Hello,hello, Mr. Thompson --

OPERATOR: Not so fast..That'll be three dollars and seventy-five cents.

JACK: (REPEATING TO HIMSELF) Three dollars and seventy-five...

OPERATOR: That's fifteen quarters.

JACK: I know what it is!

OPERATOR: Then start dropping 'em in, kid!

JACK: Hmmm...fifteen quarters...

(SOUND: AFTER A PAUSE WE HEAR ONE QUARTER DROP INTO THE PHONE. THEN HEAR A SECOND QUARTER DROP INTO THE PHONE. JUST AS WE HEAR THE THIRD QUARTER DROP, A BUGLE BEGINS TO PLAY "TAPS". THE SAD NOTES OF THE MOURNFUL MELODY ARE INTERSPERSED WITH THE CONTINUING SOUND OF DROPPING QUARTERS. AFTER THE BUGLE PLAYS THE LAST MOURNFUL NOTE OF TAPS, WE HEAR ANOTHER QUARTER DROP INTO THE PHONE)

JACK: Hello, Mr. Thompson -- Hello..

OPERATOR: One more quarter, please.

JACK: Oh, yes...yes.

(SOUND: FINAL QUARTER INTO PHONE)

OPERATOR: Here's your party.

JACK: Hello, Mr. Thompson -- I just had to call and explain why I couldn't be with you tonight...

Jack continued explaining how disappointed he was, etc., etc. That was the end of the routine and the record.

A few days later word came back saying how well the playing of the record was received and how it got big laughs from those in the Waldorf Grand Ballroom that night.

Now, having cited this routine, it gives me an opportunity to show you how material does not always fit in all places. A few years after the Waldorf benefit show, we were doing a program for broadcast in which Jack was making a long distance call to his sponsor in New York. I suggested we use the "quarter-bugle" routine on the air. We did and again it played very well with the studio audience. Then several days later we started to get letters from mothers and families who had lost sons and brothers in the war and the burial notes of Taps still lingered in their memory. Believe me, we were sorry we did it on the air where it was heard by so many people. Had we known, we certainly would not have done it. As careful as we tried to be, once in awhile we did make a mistake.

The normal writing procedure was to set a story and then cast a guest star to fit. However, there were occasions when an agent would make a client's availability known and we would devise a story around the person.

I recall an occasion in 1949, the four writers were standing in the hall at C.B.S. Studios, killing time between rehearsals when an agent named John (Judge) Carberry approached and asked if there might be a possibility of our using Frank Leahy, the famous football coach at the University of Notre Dame. Without thinking twice I said, "We certainly can."

The others were not so sure. Of the four writers, I was the only one who appreciated the national popularity of the Notre Dame football team and the great attraction it would be to have Mr. Leahy, the coach, on our show.

We had a meeting with Jack and I guess my enthusiasm sold him because a few days later a deal was made and Frank Leahy was set to appear on the program. Several days after the signing, I got a call from Jack and he was quite concerned. I recall his voice on the phone saying, "George, I've been thinking about Frank Leahy as a guest. What are we going to do with him?"

I had no prepared answer for that question and I had already asked it of myself several times. Suddenly a thought struck me. "Jack," I said, leading him on. "What are you going to do immediately following that broadcast?"

"Well, that's the night I take the train to Houston, Texas, for that benefit show I'm doing."

"And where is that show going to be done?"

"In the Stadium. Following a football game."

"That's right -- and that gives us our radio show. We'll open at home with you packing. Then we'll go to the railroad station. Plant that Frank Leahy, the Notre Dame football coach is taking the same train. After the train leaves the station, you go into the lounge car and sit next to him. Without knowing who he is or what he does and not giving him a chance to tell you, you brag about yourself and the fact that you are going to Texas to do a big benefit show from a stadium --

and it's only proper for you to be performing in a stadium because you used to be a big football star."

The quickly-ad-libbed framework, with further development was the premise of the show. In the forepart of the railroad station -- away from Jack -- we planted Frank Leahy, told who he was, and the fact he would be going on the same train, etc. After the train had pulled away, it was time for the two strangers to get together and this was done in the following fashion:

(SOUND: TRAIN CONTINUES IN BACKGROUND)

JACK: Oh, Porter..Porter..

ROY: Yes, sir.

JACK: Which way to the lounge?

ROY: The next car back, sir.

JACK: Thank you..(HUMS "LOVE IN BLOOM")

(SOUND: TRAIN DOOR OPENS..TRAIN SOUNDS UP..
TRAIN DOOR CLOSES..TRAIN SOUNDS FADE)

JACK: (HUMS LOVE IN BLOOM) ...Gee, this is a beautiful lounge car..Pardon me, sir, is this seat next to you taken?

LEAHY: No no, you may have it.

JACK: Thank you...(HUMS LOVE IN BLOOM)...It's a nice day for traveling, isn't it?

LEAHY: Yes yes, it is.

JACK: (HUMS LOVE IN BLOOM) Comfortable seats.

LEAHY: By the way, you're Jack Benny, aren't you?

JACK: Yes yes, I am..I'm on my way to Texas. I'm putting on a show at that big charity football game in Houston.

LEAHY: Well, that's very nice.

JACK: I'm rather flattered that they asked me to come down..although at one time I was quite a football player, myself....You know, I used to play with the Waukegan Terrors.

LEAHY: Waukegan Terrors?

JACK: Sounds frightening, doesn't it? (SILLY LAUGH) ...You know, I was famous for one particular play..It was a very tricky thing where I used to send the end out wide and -- Oh, pardon me.. are you familiar with football? Do you know the game at all?..By that I mean --

LEAHY: Yes, as a matter of fact, I --

JACK: Well, get this play..the ends went out wide.. I sent both my half backs to the left, and my four quarter-backs to the right.

LEAHY: ...Four quarterbacks?

JACK: Yes yes, am I getting too technical?

LEAHY: Well, not yet.

JACK: Anyway, to make a long story short, we'd pull the opposing halfbacks out of position, and I'd send my fullback into the open and throw a long <u>pass</u> to him..

LEAHY: Why didn't you send a quarterback? You had enough of them.

JACK: Well....We were having so much luck this way, I didn't want to change..Do you see many football games during the season, Mr.....Mr...

LEAHY: Leahy, Frank Leahy.

JACK: Oh, pleased to meet you, Mr. Leahy..er..Where are you from?...I mean, where's your place of business?

LEAHY: South Bend, Indiana.

JACK: Oh, nice town...You know, I used to play it in vaudeville. What do you do there? Are you a salesman..or in the insurance business?

LEAHY: Well --

JACK: Oh, I'm sorry for being so nosey..Maybe you don't wanta talk about it.

From this point on we had originally written a different finish to the scene. However, during rehearsals we were told that Mr. Leahy had just written a book and wondered if it might be possible for us to work in a plug for it. With this information, we not only worked in a plug for his book, but used it to give the scene a stronger finish than it previously had. Picking up with the line: "I'm sorry for being so nosey (about your occupation) maybe you don't want to talk about it", we continued:

JACK: Well, I think I'll go back to my compartment and read awhile, and -- Oh, darn it, I bought a magazine and left it in the station.

LEAHY: Well, if you feel like reading, Mr. Benny, I have a book here that might interest you.

JACK: Oh, thank you..Are you through with it?

LEAHY: Yes..take it along.

JACK: Well, that's awfully nice of you..Thanks very much..See you later, Mr. Leahy.

(SOUND: FOOTSTEPS..TRAIN DOOR OPENS..TRAIN NOISES UP..TRAIN DOOR CLOSES..TRAIN NOISES FADE.. FOOTSTEPS)

JACK: (HUMS LOVE IN BLOOM)..Gee, that Leahy is a nice fellow..Comes from a good town, too..South Bend, Indiana...Let's see..Oh, here's my compartment.

(SOUND: DOOR OPENS AND CLOSES)

JACK: It's funny he was so reticent about telling me what business he was in..Well, I think I'll just stretch out here on the seat and read the book he gave me. Well, this is a coincidence..This book is about football..."Notre Dame Football, The T-Formation" ..by Coach Frank Leahy...Chapter... YIPE!!...Oh, my goodness..that's who I was talking to...Frank Leahy, the coach of Notre Dame..And I'm stuck on the train with him for two days...I'll never be able to face him..I'm so embarrassed... Well, there's only one thing for me to do.. (GRUNTS TWICE) Darn these windows, you can never open them..Well, I'll just have to stay in my compartment for the entire trip.

Up to here, the show played very, very well. Frank Leahy not only got a plug for his new book, but it provided us with a device to tell Jack who Frank Leahy was. One week earlier the Notre Dame football team played Southern Methodist University and had a very tough game. Coach Leahy and his boys managed to come from behind and pull it out in the last quarter. This much-publicized close call provided us with a good tag for the show. After the commercial, Jack, embarrassed, was still hiding in his compartment.

(SOUND: KNOCK ON DOOR)

JACK: COME IN.

(SOUND: DOOR OPENS)

JACK: Oh, Mr. Leahy, Mr. Leahy, it's you!

LEAHY: Yes Jack, I thought you might like to have dinner with me this evening.

JACK: That's very sweet of you, Mr. Leahy..but first, I must apologize for making such a fool of myself... Imagine me not knowing what business you were in.

LEAHY: Well Jack, don't let it worry you. When we played S.M.U. last week, up till the last quarter, I didn't know what business I was in, either.

JACK: No!...Well, come on, Frank, we'll go to dinner, and it's my treat.

(SOUND: TRAIN AND MUSIC UP..APPLAUSE AND PLAYOFF)

When the broadcast was over, I breathed a sigh of relief because if it hadn't been a good show, I would have been the

goat. Fortunately, not only was everyone happy with it, but because of the built-in following of Notre Dame, the show got a rating which was a high for the season.

Jack's whole philosophy of attaining stardom with a character nurtured on self-deprecation, putting the show above all, even himself, is attributable to his inner genius. I remember one time in particular in the early years of our association, the writers had just finished the Sunday final rewrite with Jack. In reading the script over to ourselves, we writers became aware that Jack, the star, the big comedian, had absolutely no jokes. All the punch lines were given to the other players. We knew that it was usual for Jack's jokes to be few, but to have none at all was something else. When we informed Jack of our findings, he told us, "Fellows, don't worry about it. If it's a good show -- and I think it is -- tomorrow morning people all over the country will be saying to their neighbors, 'Did you hear the Jack Benny Show last night?'" Jack believed you can't be a successful star of a comedy show unless you're willing to also be a straight-man. This theory was also followed by Jack's longtime friend, George Burns. As proof, remember George's wonderfully entertaining years with Gracie.

Our star would do things that other comedians wouldn't dare. Their insecurity prevented it.

Jack had so much confidence in his staff, supporting cast and bit players he never hesitated to subordinate himself for the sake of the show. On one of the radio shows we did an idea which Jack, himself, suggested.

We opened the show with a sightseeing bus making its daily excursion through Hollywood and out Sunset Boulevard. The guide, played by Frank Nelson, pointed out how this free bus was furnished by the Chamber of Commerce so out-of-town visitors could get to know the city. As the bus continued on its merry way, the guide described the town, and the passengers, played by our regular bit players, reacted. As the bus continued on its way, the dialogue brought forth much laughter. This went on for ten minutes. At a point the bus started through Beverly Hills where the guide pointed out the movie stars' homes. Then as the bus started up Roxbury Drive, the guide said, "--and over on the right is the home of Jack Benny."

For the first time we heard Jack's voice. He said, "Driver, this is where I get off."

Before Jack had spoken one word, the show was half over.

Jack Benny never personally lived the part of being a star. He never took advantage of his position. When rehearsal time was set, Jack would most always be the first one there. On those occasions when he wasn't the first, he was never the last. He was considerate of other people and whenever it looked like he'd be late, I would get a phone call at home the morning of the rehearsal. I'd usually be preparing to leave for the studio when the phone would ring. By the way the voice on the other end would say, "Hello", I always knew it was Jack.

After the normal greeting, he'd say, "George, I might be a little late to rehearsal, so if I'm not there when it's time to start, would you read my part?"

Being a bit of a ham, this was something I always enjoyed doing.

Throughout our long association I not only had the fun of writing and reading parts at rehearsals, but frequently had the opportunity of playing small parts on the show. In connection with this sideline activity, I remember an incident which turned out to be rather interesting. One Sunday we were doing a satire on "The Whistler". For those who may not remember, The Whistler was not an announcer with ill-fitting dentures. It was a mystery radio show, using a character who did the narration with opening and closing theme music that was whistled. Whenever we did a satire of this popular show, I would do the title character. I would whistle the theme, then say, "I -- am the Whistler -- I walk by night -- lurking in the shadows, I see many things going on in the hearts of men and women everywhere." This would be followed by my whistling the theme again.

After dress rehearsal, I was walking in the hall of N.B.C. and I saw an actor named Bill Foreman. Bill was the person who did the legitimate Whistler. When I saw him,I got a brilliant idea. I told Bill to stay right where he was and I'd be right back. I found Jack and told him Bill was out in the hall and how great it would be to do our version of the Whistler with the real Whistler. I explained to Jack, "It won't cost any more because now instead of paying me, pay him." Jack agreed, I told Bill about the idea and he accepted the chance to be on the show.

We were already on the air and getting close to the start of the sketch when I saw Bill looking around kind of nervously. I stepped out on the stage and I whispered, "What's the matter?"

He whispered back, "Who is going to do the whistling?"

"You are."

"But I can't whistle."

He then told me that on The Whistler, the whistling was done by a young girl.

By this time Don was already into the introduction of the sketch, so I said, "Okay, Bill, I'll do the whistle, you do the narration."

That's the way we did the show and, due to union regulations, Jack had to pay both of us. I guess the moral of the story is whenever you hear a whistle, look around to see whose lips are puckered.

CHAPTER XXII

People in show business have always been a point of general interest, and, from the numerous questions asked of me, I find there is an added curiosity about writers; and especially those who write comedy. What makes them tick? Who are they? Why are they? What are they? Assuming that you, the reader, may also have pondered the above inquiries, I'll attempt to supply some of the answers.

In 1956 a Mr. Frank Orser, a graduate student at Ohio State University, selected Comedy Writers as the subject of his Master's Thesis. In doing his research, he procured the names of one hundred and forty professional comedy writers, either from program credits of through the roster of the Writer's Guild. To each, Mr. Orser sent a long, comprehensive questionnaire which delved into as many personal facets as possible, such as age, marital

status, children, kind and location of city or town where raised or lived in, educational background, socio-economic strata, religion, previous endeavors or occupations, etc., etc,,etc.

Of the one hundred and forty questionnaires sent out, fifty-six of us responded. Several months later, Mr. Orser sent us the results of his findings and, in most areas, there was a wide divergence of answers. However, in the questionnaire where he referred to a magazine article written by Steve Allen in which Mr. Allen was quoted saying, "In my opinion, homes of Jewish and Catholic background were most likely to produce our comedians," opinion was sought as to whether this could be extended to also include comedy writers. Needless to say, this provoked some of the most interesting commentary. However, on a purely statistical basis, the results were these: Agree: 43, Disagree: 11, No Comment: 1, Don't Know: 1.

In much of the commentary there seemed to be a consensus that the Jewish and Irish heritage was attributable to the long history of struggle suffered by both races, resulting in taking a humorous attitude toward life and problems. The attitude of "crying won't help, so you might just as well laugh" seemed to lighten the load. One contributor summed it up this way, "Any race which has a record of being oppressed is likely to use laughter as an antidote to misery, etc., etc."

Not having had the opportunity to read Mr. Orser's finished work, I have no way of knowing the final conclusions he may have drawn. However, using family background, I would like to present a brief story of my own personal life to see where I might possibly fit into the mold.

I was born in Erie, Pennsylvania. Erie is located in that northwest corner of the state which forced its way down to the lake between Ohio and New York. When I arrived, I already had two sisters, Kathryn and Marian. In the following years I accumulated a brother, Charles, and two more sisters, Helen and Betty Jean. Our parents were of German and Irish descent. The Irish claim is supported by our mother's maiden name, Bessie Sullivan, and the family religion, which is Catholic.

The family's departure from Pennsylvania was very sudden. My father came home from work on a Friday evening and announced, "We're going to California."

My Mother, surrounded by six small children, said, "When?"

And my father replied, "Now."

It turned out "now" wasn't quite as instant as it implied -- but almost.

Within the next ten days the house and furniture were sold, suitcases packed, train tickets bought, and on an April

morning in 1920, the Balzers, eight in number, went -- or were herded -- to the railroad station. When the conductor signaled that all were aboard, the train started to move westward leaving relatives standing on the platform waving goodbye. My mother, with a tear in her eye and a six-week's old baby in her arms, feebly returned the gesture. The expressions on the uncles, aunts and cousins looking down the track after the facing train indicated they were all in agreement. George Balzer, Senior, was off his rocker.

The first major stop was Chicago where we changed trains and diapers. Changing trains was a nuisance imposed upon people but never on livestock. Cattle and pigs were allowed to stay in their cars, which were then shuttled across town and reconnected to the other trains. Looking back, I wonder if the Conductor had seen us eating breakfast if we, too, might have been afforded the same courtesy.

The trip to Los Angeles was long and almost uneventful. It would have been completely so if I had kept my mouth shut. When father bought the train tickets, he was aware that children four years and younger were allowed to travel free. My two younger sisters and brother were in the clear. I, though small, was already five. My father, being in a situation where every penny counted, ignoring the "five" and gambling on the "small", didn't buy me a ticket. This, however, was never explained to me and being named

George after the father of our country, I couldn't tell a lie. Consequently, on every ticket-punching occasion, I displayed the inherent pride of a boy growing up by tugging at the Conductor's arm and insisting that I was five years old. This was always quickly followed by my father hitting, pushing, or shoving me down into the corner of the seat. His effort was always emphatic enough so that by the time I recovered, the Conductor had moved on up the aisle. This age incident happened several times, but eventually my father's gamble paid off. From the bruises on my head, I guess you could say he made a four the hard way.

On April 19th, the Balzer pioneers arrived in Los Angeles and shortly after were settled in our own home located in the southwest part of the city near Manchester and Broadway. The following Septmeber I had a birthday and achieved the impossible. Since getting off the train I went from four to six.

A few weeks later I entered the first grade at St. Michael's Catholic School on Manchester Boulevard near Vermont Avenue. For the next four years, while all my classmates were given clear promotions from one grade to the other, I was always promoted "on trial". "On Trial" meaning the nuns were willing to give me a shot at the next grade, but I wasn't to forget for a moment they were holding a seat for me in the grade I had just departed.

To get me over these "on trial" promotions, my mother had her own idea. Each year she would enroll me in summer school

which meant that for six weeks, during July and August, while the other kids were playing, I would be in a classroom studying. I don't think mom felt I was going to learn anything additionl, but by keeping my head out of the hot summer sun, she could slow down the propagation of those seeds of stupidity.

My early educational process was not confined to the schoolroom. I had a paper route and in this world of business I learned several valuable lessons. One in particular stands out in my mind. Each evening I would deliver my papers and would always have two or three more papers than were needed for my customers. These extra copies I would sell along the way. However, there was one cold, windy, overcast day I finished my route and still hadn't sold my extra papers. The hour was late and darkness was rapidly setting in. The temperature had dropped several degrees but I didn't want to go home until I had sold my two papers. There was only one thing to do. On a corner, about two blocks out of my way, there was a large market with bright lights and people going in and out.

When I arrived, the newsboy who had that corner was still there, which meant until he left, it would be off limits for me. However, he saw me coming and approached me with a proposition, saying, "If you'll buy my three remaining papers, I'll be sold out and the corner will be yours for the rest of the evening." Of course, I would have his three papers plus my two, but it was such a hot spot I could sell them all out in no time. Knowing

a good business deal when I heard one, I searched my pockets for enough money to buy his papers.

As he started for his home empty-handed, I, happy with my newly-found location, started shouting, "Extra..Extra..Get your Evening Herald." Between "Evening" and "Herald" the market lights went out, the manager stepped through the door, turned the key and walked off. As I stood there in the freezing darkness, clenching my original two and three newly-purchased papers, I thought to myself, "They never told me anything about this in Summer School."

In 1926 the family moved again, this time to the San Fernando Valley. At this time the Valley was devoted almost entirely to agriculture. There were acres and acres of citrus groves, alfalfa, grain, vegetables, cattle ranches, dairies, etc., etc. My father, a tinsmith by trade, had either heard about or read an ad regarding a real estate development engaged in the raising of chickens for the purpose of laying eggs. The promoter was a man from Florida named Charles Weeks and his slogan, "Independence on one acre" was very attractive. The area in the west end of the Valley devoted to this project was known as Week's Colony. Today it is known as "Winnetka" and lies about three miles east of Canoga Park, formerly Owensmouth.

Before the actual move, the family Sunday drive consisted of packing a lunch and eight people into a Model "T" Ford and

driving north through Hollywood and up over Cahuenga Pass. As we descended into the paradise below, we could tell by the gleam in Pop's eyes he was thinking, "This is the place." On one of these trips an acre of land, complete with house and chicken coop, was purchased. A few weeks later, we moved in. Well -- we didn't all move in. The house was so small my brother and I had to sleep out in what was called the feed room..a room separated from the house and connected to the chicken coops. Later, this sleeping arrangement came in very handy. Though separated at night, the family was always together at mealtime. However, with eight people squeezed into that tiny dining room, before we could eat we had to butter our elbows.

After a day or two for settling down, Mom marched all of us kids up the street where we registered and invaded Winnetka Avenue Public School. I was now in the fifth grade and, after four and one half years in Parochial school I found the changes at public school most interesting. The uniform was bib overalls and bare feet. I enjoyed the loose casual fit of the overalls but going barefoot in chicken country can periodically be unrewarding.

Six weeks later the school year ended and I received another pleasant surprise. I was promoted -- and this time, not on trial. My report card said I was to be clearly projected into the sixth grade. Some will say this was because the

studies in public school are easier, but personally, I like to think it was because I suddenly got smart.

My father did not immediately jump into the chicken business. He kept his job as foreman at the Payne Furnace Co. and every morning drove the Model "T" into downtown Los Angeles. The tin shop was located near the present-day Union Station. Little by little chickens were purchased and, as the flock increased in size, so did the family chores. Feed had to be planted, watered, cut, chopped and fed. Eggs had to be gathered, cleaned, graded, and cased. And -- there were the dropping boards--the shelf-like wooden platforms built under the chicken roosts which served the same purpose as newspapers in a birdcage. The big difference -- dropping boards couldn't be crumpled up and thrown away. The accumulation had to be scraped, swept, wheelbarrowed, and piled. And, of course, when there are chickens, there are feathers, which have to be raked, scooped, and hauled.

We were not alone. There were hundreds of other families seeking "independence" on one acre. However, none of these working ranches looked as good as the promoter's models. They were exquisite. The feed rooms and coops were immaculate. The chickens were large and healthy with shiny white feathers and bright red combs. The nests were filled with eggs and the trees were loaded with fruit. The vegetable gardens looked like living salads and the walkways were bordered with beautiful flowers.

None of the ranches looked like the models and the reason is very simple. We were selling eggs -- they were selling land.

Every member of the family worked hard seven days a week and it wasn't too long before we realized it truly was "independence on an acre." The chickens laid their eggs when they wanted to. They lost their feathers when they wanted to. They ate all the time -- which was exactly when they wanted to. And they got sick when they wanted to. Yes, the slogan was right -- we owned one acre and two thousand of the most independent chickens you ever saw. Fortunately, Pop still had his job with the furnace company so it wasn't too long before our chickens which did so poorly in the country were sent to the city where they were "finger lickin' good".

The coops were now empty and I, for one, was glad. We had done everything to make those chickens produce. We even employed a very popular gimmick. It was discovered that during the long winter nights a chicken spends too much time roosting, resulting in too little time laying eggs. This problem was overcome by installing electric lights in the hen houses. Each morning at four o'clock, the lights would be turned on and the dumb chickens, thinking the sun had risen, would fly off the roost and start eating. They would continue to eat until they felt the urge. They would then go to a nest and lay an

egg. For the remainder of the day, if there was any, the chickens could do whatever they wanted. Now, actually, if you're a chicken, this is not a bad life -- especially if you are in a pen with a rooster who also got up early and didn't use up any of his strength trying to lay an egg.

This idea of fooling the chickens by turning on the lights at four o'clock in the morning presented my father with another problem. There were several timers on the market that could be set for the selected hour, but most of them weren't any good and those that were were too expensive. After giving this dilemma about two minutes' thought, my father announced that he had found the solution. He was very mechanically minded and I could tell by the sparkle in his eye he had come up with something ingenious. Knowing we were excitedly waiting, he started with a question directed to me. "Where do you sleep?"

I replied, "In the feed room."

"That's right..and where is the main switch in the feed room?"

"On the side wall above my head."

"Right..So here's what we'll do. I'll get an alarm clock and every night before you go to bed, you set it for -- "

Even though my early school history was "passing on trial", I immediately got the picture, and that is exactly what we did.

Starting in mid-October, and every night until March, the routine never varied. At bedtime I'd set the clock, go to sleep and at four A.M. the alarm would ring -- I'd sit up in bed, reach high up on the wall for the switch, give it a push and drop back onto my pillow. Pop's idea not only worked, it was infallible -- with my brother in the same bed as a back-up.

After a few weeks, hearing the alarm, sitting up, reaching for the switch, giving it a push, and falling back on the pillow became automatic. By the middle of March, the sun was now coming up early and I could stop setting the clock. However, by this time I was so programmed that every morning at four, though sound asleep, I continued my sitting, reaching, pushing, and falling.

My turning on the chicken coop lights when it wasn't necessary was expensive until my father came up with another ingenious solution. He pulled my bed away from the wall. The lights no longer burned, but my involuntary gyrations decreasingly continued on through the summer. Just as they were about to disappear, winter returned, my bed was pushed back to the wall, the clock was set and the whole process was restarted. As a matter of fact, just last week -- forty-five years later -- my wife poked me in the ribs and said, "George, what are you doing sitting up in bed and reaching toward the ceiling?"

Half awake, I asked, "What time is it?"

"Four o'clock in the morning."

With that I fell back on my pillow and turned away. I didn't have the heart to tell her the true story. To this day whenever I hear the song, "The World Is Waiting For The Sunrise", I think of those chickens.

In 1927 my father quit his job and told us he was going into the egg business. Mom, very patiently explained to him we had just gotten out of the egg business. He then just as patiently told her he didn't mean that kind of egg business. When we had chickens, we sold eggs. He was now going to buy eggs -- and then sell them.

Starting the very next morning, that's exactly what he did. He went to the neighbors and bought several cases of eggs, then drove into an area of Los Angeles called the Wilshire District, then one of the city's finest neighborhoods. With a basket full of fresh eggs on his arm, he went door to door. That evening Pop returned home very discouraged and depressed. How do you tell a wife you left home with four cases of eggs and only sold two dozen? But he didn't give up and in a few months worked up a route for each day in the week. For the next couple of years every member of the family with his own particular job to do was involved in this kind of egg business.

Though the new business went well, to buy food and clothing for eight, a supplemental income was needed. This was acoomplished by acquiring a machine to sharpen lawnmowers.

Also, my father did sheet metal work on the side. I, along with my brother and sisters, spent the summers working in the fruit orchards and packing sheds. On weekends, I was a caddy at the Girard (now Woodland Hills) Country Club. I also managed to squeeze in a paper route. All monies were put in one pot and very carefully doled out.

We also attempted to solve the milk problem by buying a goat. This was fine until it turned out I was the only one who could milk her. To do this I had to tie one of her hind legs to a post and, while firmly holding the other with my left hand, with my right hand free I gently manipulated the dangling outlets attached to her source of supply. I soon developed a technique which produced a very good stream. In doing so, I must have been pleasantly gentle because that goat kept turning her head toward me with a look in her eye that expressed more than friendship.

Like all things bordering on romance, goat milking also has its problems. On Sundays the rest of the family would go visiting, picnicking, or other forms of recreation and I always had to stay home. This because I was really the only one who could milk Nanny, and when milking time arrives, someone has got to be there. Once in awhile, as young boys are wont to do, I'd be out playing and forget all about this evening chore. Then while walking toward home, I would be reminded of my obligation

by the bleating in the distance. Breaking into a run and grabbing the pail.. I rounded the porch, all the while calling, "Nanny..Nanny" to let her know that relief was just a squeeze away.

I recall once I was about two hours late and that goat was in real pain. I never really appreciated what she was going through until years later when I found myself number sixteen in a one-stall restroom line at a free beer picnic.

My relationship with the goat ended a long time ago and yet milking her still has an effect on my golf game -- I have a tendency to pull to the left.

In those early years the needs for existence were not too great, but nevertheless there was always a money gap that had to be filled -- or at least narrowed. To do this my father -- after the egg route, lawnmower sharpening, and sheet metal work -- would squeeze in any additional odd job that might be available. Wherever these tasks called him, I always went along and this brought about an event I shall never forget. On a ranch a few miles away lived a family by the name of Swartz. Being a bit more affluent than the rest of us, the Swartz place consisted of a large home surrounded by twenty fertile acres on which they rotated crops of beans, tomatoes, lettuce, etc., etc., etc. The Balzers and the Swartzes had only one thing in common -- The Swartzes also had six children.

On one of our visits to their home, Mrs. Swartz, a large, stately woman, informed my father the house had a small leak in the roof and asked that he fix it. The next Saturday afternoon, with a ladder tied to the side of the car and a bundle of shingles in the back seat, we were on our way. When we arrived, we had to make our way around several cars which were parked in the driveway which indicated Mrs. Swartz had her lady friends over for Bridge.

For those who don't know, you don't patch a roof by just nailing on shingles. First, you make an inspection from inside the attic area to determine where the rain has been coming through. This my dad could do without disturbing anyone because the crawl hole was located in the ceiling of the back porch. Using the ladder, my father, followed closely by me, entered the attic and started his tour of inspection.

The roof had a steep pitch, so it was possible to stand and walk providing you were very careful as you stepped from one ceiling joist to the other. About half way through this roof-inspecting excursion, I lifted my foot from one ceiling joist -- started it toward the next joist -- and missed. Though I weighed little more than a hundred pounds, it was sufficient to send my leg down through the ceiling in the center of the living room. My father, standing nearby in the attic, was

stunned. However, he was not nearly as stunned as Mrs. Swartz and her three lady guests who were playing Bridge and suddenly found the table and themselves engulfed by falling plaster with its accompanying cloud of dust. When the air had cleared, they saw, dangling from a hole in the ceiling directly above, the leg of a thirteen-year-old boy. My leg swayed back and forth waving a totally unexpected and embarrassed greeting. I imagine this was the first and last Bridge game ever played where the dummy was in the attic.

A little while later, Mr. Swartz, returning from the fields, stepped into the living room just as Pop and I were finishing cleaning up. He looked at the gaping hole in the ceiling and reacted with complete and absolute calm. That was the kind of nature Mr. Swartz possessed. He was a large, heavy-set man and to him nothing in this world was important enough to get upset over.

I was even more impressed with Dad Swartz's imperturbable character the day he drove their new family car to Reseda, the next town, where he did some shopping. The car was a Chevrolet and they had had it only about a month. Having finished his shopping, Mr. Swartz drove back home. While getting himself and the packages out of the car, Gleason, one of his sons, approached, asking, "Dad, where did you get the car?"

"What do you mean,where did I get it? We bought it a month ago."

"But, Dad, this isn't our car."

"Gleason, isn't our car green?"

"Yes."

"Then, why do you say this isn't our car?"

"Because, Dad, our car is a sedan. You brought home a Coupe."

"Well, I'll be damned." Then holding out the keys, said, "Here, Gleason, you take it back."

I always had a feeling Dad Swartz really noticed his mistake very shortly after he made it. He also knew that by simply driving it on home, he wouldn't be the one who'd be taking it back and having to face the rightful owner with this embarrassing, ridiculous, but true story.

The next week-end after the ceiling break-through I returned with my father to the Swartz home where I learned that the egg peddler, lawnmower sharpener, sheetmetal worker and roofer was also a plasterer. All these endeavors were interspersed with raising chickens, goats, turkeys, ducks, and children.

Ours was not the only family that had to struggle. Every kid in the neighborhood had to pitch in and help their parents. Despite this, we all found ways to relax and enjoy ourselves -- especially during the summer. In the pace of life in those depression years we used to think it was exciting

to spend the evening under the corner street light sitting on the warm pavement. It was our clock. We talked until the cement got cool, then we all went home.

Another form of recreation was to give each other birthday parties. Whenever possible, they would be a surprise. This usually worked except for one girl whose name I don't recall, but I firmly remember she had absolutely no eyebrows. When her birthday came around, we always gave her a party, but we never tried to surprise her. The reason was, with no eyebrows, we couldn't tell whether she was or not.

Neighborhood picture day was always a time of excitement. On day each year a photographer came out from Los Angeles and went from street to street taking pictures of all who wanted them. As always, the ones who wanted them were the parents and the pictures they wanted were of their kids. Since few families had cameras, this opportunity to get pictures was not to be missed. Illness was no excuse. If necessary, kids were taken out of sick beds, dressed, posed, focussed, and snapped.

One picture of the Balzer kids was taken at a time my brother, Charles, was suffering with the mumps. His well-rounded face, compared to the other five, looked like he was the one who was getting all the food. We could have avoided this false impression by sticking a clarinet in his mouth. That way he would have looked like he was blowing.

At Winnetka Grammar School I always participated in sports -- baseball, soccer, basketball, and track. 1928 was a highlight of my athletic activities. I was chosen to be on the Olympic Team. I must admit it easn't the Olympic Team which went to Amsterdam, Holland that year, but the Junior Olympics which were sponsored by the Los Angeles Times Newspaper. Athletes were selected from all the city schools and for weeks I practiced running, jumping, and several other events which I had entered.

At long last, the day of competition arrived. I was ready. Ready for the ride to the Los Angeles Coliseum and ready for the gun to start the various events. That morning I got up early for some last-minute practice -- running up and down the driveway. While doing these loosening-up exercises, my mother called to me about something or other and, in answering, I sassed her. A few more words were exchanged and suddenly she told me to come into the house and that I would not be going to the Junior Olympics; and that's the way it remained -- I didn't go.

This punishment was hard for me to accept, especially the following Monday morning when I had to go to the principal, Miss Anne Hale Upton, and explain why I wasn't at the games. When I finished my story, Miss Upton looked at me and said, "George, what your mother did was right." Though I didn't say so, I, too, knew she was.

The incident was closed and was never brought up again until almost fifty years later. I was visiting Mom, who was now in her ninetieth year, and bedfast. As I was about to leave, she said, "George, there is one thing I have always regretted and that's the day I refused to let you go to the Junior Olympics."

I quickly tried to explain that what she did at the time was not only right, but it accomplished two things. First, it taught me a lesson, and secondly, it kept a lousy athlete from going to the Los Angeles Coliseum and embarrassing himself. My mother's disclosure was the first time I was aware that the incident of my Youth had been tucked away in the memory of her sensitive nature.