

Missing Brother March 31, 2009

Gracie's Missing Brother Gag



The following is an excerpt from "Gracie: A Love Story" by George Burns...

The gimmick that really made us major radio stars was the search for Gracie's mythical brother in 1933. We'd been using Gracie's mythical brother as a character in our act for years. It was Gracie's brother who invented a way to manufacture pennies for only three cents. It was Gracie's brother who marketed an umbrella with holes in it so you'd be able to see when the rain stopped. It was Gracie's brother who first printed a newspaper on cellophane so that he could read it in a restaurant and still keep an eye on his hat and coat. And it was Gracie's brother who broke his leg falling off an ironing board while pressing his pants. Actually, as we discovered, Gracie's brother had been missing for years, but no one had noticed it because he'd left a dummy in

his place.

Gracie's brother got lost when Stanley Holt of the J. Walter Thompson advertising agency and Paul White, a network executive, decided we needed an inexpensive way to publicize the fact that our show was going to move its broadcasting time from nine to nine-thirty pm. Their plan was that Gracie would show up unannounced on other network programs, supposedly in search of her missing brother, and mention the time change.

The stunt began on January 4, 1933. Eddie Cantor was in the middle of a story when Gracie suddenly appeared and tearfully announced she was searching for her missing brother. A half-hour later Jack Benny was on the air when Gracie wandered in and explained, "I'm looking for my missing brother. Have you seen him?"

"Well," Jack asked, "what does he do?"

"He was going to go into the restaurant business, but he didn't have enough money. So he went into the banking business."

"Your brother didn't have enough money so he went into the banking business?" Jack also did my part very well.

"Yes. He broke into the banking business at two o'clock in the morning and was kidnapped by two men dressed as policemen."

Two days later Gracie and I were scheduled to appear with Rudy Vallee on NBC. The script was written, we were in the studio. But moments before the show went on the air NBC ordered Vallee to delete any mention of Gracie's missing brother from his script because they didn't want to give additional publicity

to stars on CBS....

George [Burns] and Gracie [Allen], still working for CBS, were involved in a running gag about Gracie's "missing brother" George Allen.... In working out their opening exchange [for a guest appearance on Rudy Vallee's radio show on NBC], all hands agreed it might begin with Rudy saying, "Hello, Gracie, have you found George yet?" Scripts were prepared accordingly. NBC, in a last-minute ruling, decreed otherwise. The missing brother gag, NBC held, was a CBS promotion, and nuts to a rival network promoting itself over NBC facilities. The script would have to be rewritten, the missing brother crack thrown out."-New York Daily News, May 6, 1958...So the script was trimmed and Gracie's missing brother really was missing from the new script. But when we went on the air, our friend Rudy Vallee "mistakenly" picked up the wrong script and asked Gracie about her brother. As soon as he did, a nervous engineer in the control room cut him off, and the entire NBC radio network went dead for four seconds.

Gracie hadn't even been in the radio business for a year, but she'd succeeded in knocking the second-greatest network off the air.

The fact that NBC had censored Rudy Vallee, even for four seconds, created a publicity bonanza for us. Suddenly, everybody in the country wanted to get in on the gag. No bit had ever captured the attention of the public as quickly as this one did. Radio had only recently put large areas of the country on almost instantaneous contact with other areas, and this was the first stunt to take advantage of that capability.

Gracie walked in on "Guy Lombardo," "Mystery in Paris," "The Tydol Show," soap operas, dramatic shows. "Has anybody here seen my brother, George?" she would ask. Someone would say no, and she would respond happily, "Oh well, then bye-bye." In the middle of a tense drama set inside a submerged submarine a telephone rang, and someone on the surface asked the captain, "Is Gracie Allen's brother down there with you?"

One night Gracie appeared with the popular Singin' Sam, who offered to help in the search and asked what Gracie's brother called himself.

"Oh, you're so silly," Gracie laughed, "He doesn't have to call himself, he knows who he is."

"What I mean is, if your brother was here, what would you call him?"

"If my brother was here," Gracie pointed out, "I wouldn't have to call him."

Singin' Sam wasn't about to give up. "No, listen to me. If I found your brother, and I wanted to call him by name, what would it be?"

"It would be wonderful."

The stunt rapidly spread beyond radio. On Broadway, actress Grace Moore, appearing in *Du Barry*, responded to a costar's line asking where she'd been by ad-libbing, "I have just been out hunting for Gracie Allen's brother." Stores all over the country advertised, "Shop here. You'll find excellent bargains--and you might even find Gracie Allen's missing brother." In Congress, Speaker of the House Nicholas Longworth objected to a speech made by Senator Huey Long, telling reporters, "It sounds like Gracie Allen's brother." *Time* magazine reported that famed big-game hunter Frank "Bring 'em Back Alive" Buck had joined the search. The catchphrase "You look like Gracie Allen's brother" became popular throughout the country, and comedians joked, "If an empty taxicab pulls up and no one gets out, that's

Gracie's brother." Newspapers in several cities ran stories about men who had been arrested and were claiming to be Gracie's missing brother. And people all around the country warned friends, "If you see something on the ground, don't step on it. It might be Gracie Allen's brother."

We took full advantage of the publicity. We hired the Burns Detective Agency to search for him. Gracie was photographed at the Empire State Building, the Statue of Liberty, and Coney Island, looking for her brother. Wherever we appeared, she went to the lost and found department of the largest-circulation newspaper to see if anyone had turned in her brother. When we played a theater in Washington, D.C., she went to Griffith Stadium to meet Babe Ruth and his twin brother, telling reporters that she knew he had a twin brother because she'd read that Babe Ruth's double had won a game for the Yankees.

Within two weeks we recieved more than three hundred fifty thousand letters, some of them claiming to be form kidnappers who had Gracie's brother and warning that unless we paid a substantial ransom they would be forced to return him immediately. Our Crossley rating skyrocketed. Gracie's brother had become more famous by disappearing than I had by showing up.

George Burns



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