



Sunday, 26 May 2013

## Screw-ups and Sportsmen

Inside jokes got on the air periodically on the Jack Benny radio show. Some are decipherable; laughter from the band greeted Jack reading a fairy tale featuring a character named "Bertram Scott," who was Jack's business secretary. But others are a little more arcane.

On the April 16, 1950 show, one of Jack's jokes bombed. He then ad-libbed "My writers own an oil well. I can't do anything with them." Jack ad-libbed the oil well reference a few more times when the show started dying.

I've tried in vain to find a contemporary reference to any of the writers owning an oil well. But I did find a newspaper column that mentioned the Sportsmen Quartet owned one.

The Sportsmen had been around since the 1930s. They had their own 15-minute show for a time, appeared on Rudy Vallee's and Judy Canova's programmes and even provided songs for animated cartoons. They had even done some anonymous work on *The Jack Benny Program* before "officially" becoming part of it in the 1946-47 season, originally playing off the notorious Benny cheapness. Eventually, the Quartet did an excellent and memorable job crooning parody versions of songs that incorporated sales pitches and stock phrases for Lucky Strike cigarettes, cleverly arranged by Mahlon Merrick.

Little was written about the Quartet during their heyday, but the United Press came out with this story in 1953. About the time it was published, the Quartet were touring with Bob Crosby and had stopped in Vancouver with Canadian-born Gisele Mackenzie to raise money to pay for the British Empire Games the following year.

### Singers of Commercials Branch Into Own Show

By ALINE MOSBY

United Press Hollywood Correspondent

HOLLYWOOD, May 27. — The "Four Sportsmen" quartet which parlayed a "Hmm" into fame and fortune on Jack Benny's radio program, said today they're branching into their own show so they can really sing.

The four male crooners thank Benny hourly for giving them overnight success on his CBS program. But, they sighed, they can only give out with a cigaret commercial and "hmmm" that's a running joke on the show.

Like Phil Harris, Dennis Day and other Benny alumni, they're taking the plunge on their own.

#### Two Singers

"Bob Crosby sings on the show and so does Dennis Day, so they don't need us for regular songs," explained Gurney Bell, Bill Days, Jay Meyer and Marty Sperzel—only not all at once.

"We'll still stay with Benny, but we have our own transcribed radio show now so we can really sing songs."

The hit they made as Benny's foils have brought them a string of other sideline businesses, too. The Sportsmen incorporated themselves and invested in a housing project, an oil well, a company in the Philippines, a helicopter and a play that flopped.

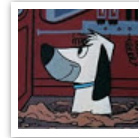
They've scored success on personal appearance tours, after a battle to convince booking agents they could do something besides a musical "hmmmm." They also plan a series of television films.

"We went into these businesses together on our motto, 'United we sing, divided we fall,'" quipped Days.

The "Hmm" on the Benny show started a joke.



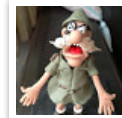
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Spencer Jordan's amazing work... we are hoping artists like Ian

Knox...and families of these comic artists can see these gems... - made with fimo clay I had ago and its not very easy to do...

2 hours ago

### Fernando Liera Blog Cartoons



Vehicle Verification Centers of Mexico City will reopen in August with COVID

safety measures. - ©2020 fernandollercartoons.com

4 hours ago

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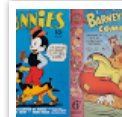


Cowboy Church #67 - Hello my friends and welcome back for another

service of cowboy church. Today's musical selection begins with Gene Autry singing "Dear Hearts and Gentle Pe..."

7 hours ago

### Termite Terrace headlines



Question for All You Cartoon Collectors! - OK so I've been doing some

looking around. Bosko apparently had a comic book and I'm wondering if any of you know of

"Don Wilson, the announcer, was to do the commercial and rather than make it a stereotyped thing, they decided to have a quartet do a hum. Then Benny could say, 'For this I pay \$500?' and faint," said Meyer.

### Backing

The Sportsmen already were singing as "backing" for such name chirpers as Ginny Sims and Dinah Shore. The unknown quartet was hired for the Benny show. They were such a hit that Benny kept them on. On one program Benny threatened to sell them to rival Fred Allen, and CBS was flooded with irate letters defending the quartet.

One member of the combination has a pitchpipe to give the quartet their cue for the "Hmmm."

"Once we missed the note, so on the next show Benny locked us in the closet and made us say the commercial 500 times," grinned Sperzel.

Sperzel's reference is well-known to fans of the Benny radio show. The broadcast of January 8, 1950 was a complete shambles—except to the audience, who love the spontaneity of mistakes. It started when award-winning announcer Don Wilson spoonerised columnist Drew Pearson's name into "Drear Pooson." The sketch which took up the second half of the show had Mary bollix a line. And then the Sportsmen missed a singing cue, with only a couple of them (sounding off-mike) delivering their lyrics. The following weeks, Jack used it as a running gag which Sperzel explained the interview.

For whatever reason, Sperzel became less talkative years later. Non-talkative is, perhaps, a better term. He flatly told people he didn't want to talk about his career. He died in 2011 at 98, the last surviving member of the post-1943 version of the Quartet.

Posted by **Yowp** at 08:12



Labels: [Aline Mosby](#), [Jack Benny](#)

## 4 comments:



**J Lee** 26 May 2013 at 10:20

The Sportsmen seem to have run into the same sort of frustration Kenny Baker did, in wanting to be used less as a comedy prop on a comedy show. But unlike Baker, the Quartet followed the Dennis Day route of maintaining their connection with Jack's show while trying to strike out on their own, and were still being used by Benny and his writers into the 1960s, well after the Lucky Strike sponsorship ended.

[Reply](#)



**Yowp** 28 May 2013 at 02:26

Tom Wagner mentioned on Facebook: "According to Bill Days, there was a change made that they didn't tell the Quartet about and you heard the result." I've never seen the Days story in print.

[Reply](#)

▼ [Replies](#)

**Tom Wagner** 30 May 2017 at 13:30

That's because Bill Days told me the story :)

[Reply](#)



**wbhst** 17 April 2015 at 03:09

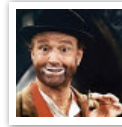
There were a few others who served time in The Sportsmen over the years. One was John Rarig, but perhaps the most famous alum was Thurl Ravenscroft whose fame lay with such moments as being the "low voice" on Rosemary Clooney's 1954 recording of "This Ole House" - and more significantly, "You're A Mean One, Mr. Grinch" from the 1966 animated Christmas special "How The Grinch Stole Christmas."

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additional covers you could share! ...

16 hours ago

### **Way Too Damn Lazy To Write A Blog**



Born on July 18, 1913 - Red Skelton - \*Today's post commences

with the Guzzler's Gin routine ...

1 day ago

### **News From ME**

Sorry... - As far as I know, I do not have any diseases. I just have too much to deal with right now so I won't be blogging much if at all. I'm postponing all the web...

1 day ago

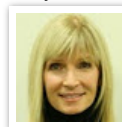
### **Cartoon Research**

In His Own Words: H.T. Kalmus on Disney in Technicolor - Suspended Animation #276 Many references may be found regarding two-strip Technicolor. I have been guilty of discussing Walter Lantz's King of Jazz (1930)...

2 days ago

### **AFRTS Archive**

**Mary Turner 1985** - Mary Turner today Mary Turner really rocked the house.



Normally when any of the jocks got a reaction, it'd be split.

The ones

that were really liked wou...

4 days ago

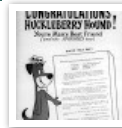
### **The World of Knight**



TONIGHT, 11:54 PM. - COPYRIGHT 2020 BY MILTON KNIGHT

4 days ago

### **Yowp**



Hanna-Barbera Birthday Did-You-Knows - 63 years ago today, some


forms were signed by George Sidney, Bill Hanna and Joe Barbera creating what eventually became the biggest TV cartoon operation i...

1 week ago

### **Supervised By Fred Avery: Tex Avery's Warner Brothers Cartoons**

Wabbit Twouble: A Small Addendum to An Outstanding Podcast -

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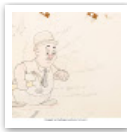
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Original animation drawing from Wabbit Twouble with color notations

for the ink and paint department. Release date: 12/20/41 Availability: Looney Tunes Gol... 3 weeks ago

**Mark Kausler's CatBlog**  
**The Lady and the Tiger** - From the Cathy Hill Archive of Unpublished Comics comes "The Lady and the Tiger". This story was drawn before Cathy started the "Mad Raccoons" series. U... 4 weeks ago

**What About Thad?**  
**Cartoon Logic Podcast** - And yet another distraction from this brick and mortar blog... I've entered the world of podcasting with renowned animation director and historian Bob Jaques... 10 months ago

 **Likely Looney, Mostly Merrie**  
**That's all, folks!** - My posts have gotten thinner over the years. I'm aware of that. I've been hopeful for a long time, that I can remain active with blogging and sharing furth... 1 year ago

 **Dr. Grob's Animation Review**  
**The Flying Man** - 'The Flying Man' is a very short absurdist film in which a man drops his coat to take a swim in mid air. Another man with a dog drops by, tries the same th... 2 days ago

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