



Wednesday, 4 December 2019

Before Allen's Alley

The Allen's Alley segment is the best-remembered portion of the Fred Allen radio show, but it existed for only a comparatively short period of time, and not all the cast members who were in place at its height in the late '40s were there at the beginning.

The Alley was Allen's attempt to put a running format behind something he had been doing on his show since the early 1930s—using his stooges to comment in various ways on some item in the news. The difference was while several of the actors used similar voices or dialects often on the earlier broadcasts, there were no distinct characters.

When things settled down, the characters in the Alley were played by Minerva Pious, Peter Donald, Parker Fennelly and Kenny Delmar, who doubled as the show's announcer. Pious had been with Allen pretty much since the beginning, the others came along as replacements over the years when Alley denizens decided to try Hollywood or moved on to other shows.

A fellow named Jon Stokes profiled Allen's supporting players, first in a 1938 article in "Screen and Radio Weekly," a newspaper magazine supplement. He then took the same article and sold it to *Radio Varieties* magazine for its May 1940 edition. Stokes had to make some modifications. For one thing, Allen was no longer on "Town Hall Tonight," the show changed names in 1939 (and also changed producers). For another, actress Eileen Douglas died in 1939. And child actor Jackie Grimes was no longer on the show. Stokes had to delete copy and pad out the 1940 version. I've combined the two articles.

Besides the news commentary on the 1930s and early '40s shows, Allen used his supporting cast in a weekly sketch. At the height of the Alley years, sketches were built around guest stars and the supporting cast didn't take the main parts.

John Brown ended up, among other things, as Digger O'Dell on *The Life of Riley*, before getting mired in the blacklist and dying several years later. Charlie Cantor went over to *Duffy's Tavern*, playing the same type of brain-dead character (you can hear Sid Raymond using the Cantor voice in cartoons as Baby Huey).

Nice, Fresh Ham

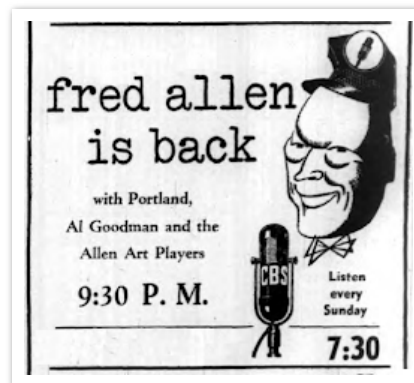
Fred Allen's A-1 Quality

By Jon Stokes

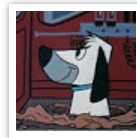
Ham, often found between slices of bread, has a traditional way of turning up on theater stages, the screen, in night clubs, and over the air. As a dramatic term it is strictly a mark of opprobrium, a label of discredit that rings of artistic ineptitude. A ham, in short is a lousy actor. Yet members of one of the most popular dramatic groups on the air today are self-confessed "hams", and mighty proud of it, too.

There are, of course, hams and hams. To wear that badge of dubious distinction because you don't know any better is one thing, to be a "good" ham is another. For hamdom at its best, take a look at the Mighty Allen Art Players, heard with Fred Allen every Wednesday evening on the "Fred Allen Hour" over the NBC-Red Network.

There is no question but what the Mighty Allen Art Players belong to the group which merits that stamp of porcine perfection. When Allen, himself, introduces their fifteen -minute dramatic sketch he openly refers to them as "the pullets of Pulitzer," the "only group of actors to bring tomato baskets on stage," and "The only thespian troupe ever to play 'Uncle Tom's Cabin' and have the blood hounds walk out on them." One is easily



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misled into thinking that their ludicrous dramatic farces would make the collective Little Theater groups of the country look like a flock of Duses and Drews in comparison. But such, indeed, is far from the case.

Minerva Pious, John Brown, and Charlie Cantor have reached their present positions of first-rate hams only after years of experience and success on the stage and before the microphone.

Take Charlie Cantor who was introduced to grease paint more than twenty years ago when, during high school vacation, he answered an urgent summons to act as "straight" man for his brother, "Rusty" Cantor, then a famous vaudevillian. Save for a few ill-fated years when he decided to settle down and enter the shoe business, Charlie's been trouping either in vaudeville, musical comedy, dramatic stock, or on the air.

A short, butter-ball of a fellow, consistently jolly despite the ever-increasing bald pate that privately causes him much mental anguish, Charlie is starting his 4th year as a member of the Mighty Allen Art Players. During that time he has taken more than 200 different parts in the Allen sketches, ranging from that of trained seal to a mediaeval bailiff. He personally favors such characterizations as a cloak-and-suitier, or an harrassed delicatessen proprietor. For Allen, Charlie is always the ham. Yet he is in constant demand for straight dramatic programs.

Commencing his career in vaudeville in 1920 as a black -face comedian and dialectician, Charlie next turned to stock, and then for two and one half years, believe it or not, he played the part of Little Eva's mild -tempered plantation owner father in a road company of "Uncle Tom's Cabin." Then came the ill-fated shoe venture and Charlie, flat broke, saw desirable coffee and cakes as a radio actor. His first job was at a small Brooklyn station with a banjo -playing partner. They worked sustaining—and gratis—for one week and then went commercial at \$15 a pair.

Harry Richman gave Charlie his first real start, and before long he was on constant call by network producers. Currently Cantor may be heard not only with Fred Allen on the "Fred Allen Hour," but on as many as twenty programs throughout the week.

Charlie's voice isn't hard to recognize, once you learn it, but like most character actors his name is rarely mentioned over the air. It's one of the hazards of being a first rate ham.



THE MIGHTY ALLEN ART PLAYERS
(Left to right) John Brown, Minerva Pious, Charlie Cantor and Eileen Douglas

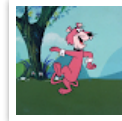
Minerva Pious, is another Mighty Allen Art Player who arrived at the enviable status of a well-smoked ham only after plenty of seasoning.

"Min" is a veteran of the Mighty Allen Art Players. She has been with Allen since he started his program seven years ago. Only five feet tall she belies her penetrating voice, but she does have that saucy, impertinent appearance you would expect from listening to the parts she plays over the air. Wait for the sharp-tongued shrew; the rasping voice of the chambermaid or spinster of uncertain years and you have Minerva. Pious, incidentally, is her real name.

Born in Moscow on March 5, 1909, Min had her first stage experience as a child walk-on in a production of the Russian Imperial Grand Opera in which her father sang the baritone lead. She was educated in dramatics in Salzburg. Before she arrived in radio she played character bits on the New York stage and did a turn in the editorial department of a nationally known news syndicate.

Minerva broke into radio as an accompanist, and says she wouldn't be the ham she is today if she hadn't been fired early in her career. One night she was playing for a radio singer when she forgot the notes. The singer, Harry Taylor, fired her, but later on, in one of radio's strange twists of fate, he became producer of Fred Allen's show, and remembering the little girl who spoke with a Russian accent, hired her for a Mighty Allen Art Player. [The show is now produced by a triumvirate—Pat Weaver, Jack Van Nostrand and Bill Rousseau. 1938 version]. The show is now produced by Bob Welch.

Yowp

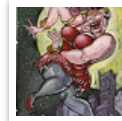


Yogi Bear Becomes a Star -
Snagglepuss and Yaky Doodle can thank Hank

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All this and Rabbit Stew: Bugs Bunny's Most Shocking Moment -

Release date: 9/13/1941
AVAILABILITY: On many dollar-store VHS tapes and DVDs, and online, usually in atrocious visual quality. You can view a better-than...

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Peter Gray's Comics and Art



An early Tom Thug page for sale and other comic art by Lew Stringer go

to link and ebay.. -
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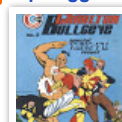
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Mark Kausler's CatBlog Your Comics Page 1-22-

2020 - Here are some rare stills from Frank Capra's "Lost Horizon" (1937), directed by Frank Capra. That's Mr. Capra behind the movie camera (right top) and his ...

2 months ago

Rip Jagger's Dojo



Dojo Update! - Sadly it seems my efforts to establish a

John Brown, "the Englishman," as the rest of the troupe refer to him, is a third member of Allen's coterie of hams. Tall, dark, mustached John was born in Hull, England, thirty-four years ago; Most likely because he was hired originally six years ago, to do the part of an English duke, John gets the bulk of the more refined masculine roles, but nevertheless is as versatile a dialectician as Charlie Cantor, and plays with him on several straight dramatic shows.

John's first stage experience came in 1916 when he was in public school in England—a short lived experience since in the play, "Master Skylark," he was always killed in the first act. After a theater venture in Australia, he came to this country in the early twenties and started in stock in upper New York State. For six months he played character parts, acted as stage manager, and painted scenery. Then came Broadway and the legitimate stage, where he is still remembered for his work in "Peace On Earth" and "Milky Way." In fact, if it weren't for a serious shortage of good hams in radio, John would have probably continued his stage career. As it was he was the one man Fred Allen wanted to fill an opening in the "Mighty Allen Art Players," and Fred has a way of having his way.

Eileen Douglas, the fourth of this famous group, divides the female parts with Minerva Pious. Their work tends to bear the same relation as does John Brown's to Charlie Cantor's, in that Eileen is apt to be the lady of a haughty English salon, while Min romps around in the part of the scullion in the kitchen.

The only native American of the group, Eileen is a born and bred New Yorker. She, too, worked on the legitimate stage, and is an accomplished writer to boot. Last of all comes the apprentice of the group, little Jackie Grimes, who wears the distinction of being a well seasoned ham at 11 with consummate ease.

Ordinarily a well mannered youngster, Jackie becomes a snarling, spitting urchin of the genus brat at the drop of a hat when he plays opposite Allen in the dramatic skits.

If Jackie can be termed a Mighty Allen Art Player apprentice it is not because of age primarily, nor his brief few months on the show, but rather from the point of view of experience on the Allen air opus. He's been in radio since he was four years old; is heard regularly on the Columbia Workshop, and for some time has taken all boy parts on the March of Time. He's been on the legitimate stage too—with parts in "The Old Maid," the Pulitzer Prize winner which starred Helen Menken and Judith Anderson; "Stark Mad," "Excursion" and "Western Waters," among others.

However, though prospects look bright and he apparently has all it takes to make the right sort of ham, acceptance as a full-fledged Mighty Allen Art Player is no trifling matter and many months more are likely to pass before he is given a permanent set of cap and bells cut down to his size.

So, the next time you tune in "Fred Allen Hour" and hear Charlie, Min, and the rest clowning through script, buffooning this line, and muffing that until your own sides are splitting, at their hammy acting, remember, it takes plenty of time to smoke a ham!

Posted by [Yowp](#) at [07:02](#)



Labels: [Fred Allen](#)

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M. Mitchell Marmel 4 December 2019 at 15:42

Last of all comes the apprentice of the group, little Jackie Grimes, who wears the distinction of being a well seasoned ham at 11 with consummate ease.

Ordinarily a well mannered youngster, Jackie becomes a snarling, spitting urchin of the genus brat at the drop of a hat when he plays opposite Allen in the dramatic skits.

As Jack Grimes, he voiced Sparky and Chim Chim in the 1966 Speed Racer, among many other roles... ;-)

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Pokey 1 March 2020 at 07:34

Good point but Speed didn't come out till 1967.

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1 year ago

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