



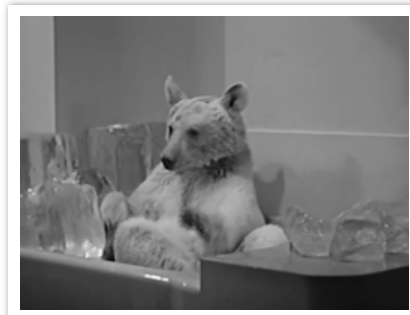
Sunday, 3 July 2022

Carmichael

Maybe the oddest character to populate the Jack Benny radio world was one that wasn't human.

For a while, Jack had a pet polar bear named Carmichael.

The bear showed up on the February 12, 1939 episode. The plot was that someone sent him to Jack as a birthday present. It was never determined who. Not that it really mattered. Carmichael didn't actually appear on the show all that often and was pretty much gone by 1942. He was basically a vehicle for the writers to give Rochester something to say in his weekly phone calls on the show. When the writers ran out of Carmichael gags, they simply stopped using him.



Ed Beloin and Bill Morrow must have had a thing for animals. They stuck Jack with an ostrich, a camel and a horse. None of them were funny and none lasted long; the camel appeared in one episode (actor Stan Freberg annoyed Jack in rehearsal and was never hired again).

For a time, the radio audience liked the incongruousness of Jack owning a polar bear, so Morrow and Beloin capitalised on it by sticking Carmichael into the plot of the feature film *Buck Benny Rides Again*. This became fodder for the media, with newspaper reports of brown bears being dyed white, and people actually mailing bears to Jack (evidently some were live). One report said Carmichael was going to be cast in the Benny-Allen picture *Love Thy Neighbor* (instead of a bear, they got a turkey).

There were other problems, as the weekend newspaper supplement *Screen and Radio Weekly* revealed in its edition of January 14, 1940.

JACK BENNY: Villain

Of the Bear that Was Not There

By Jon Stokes

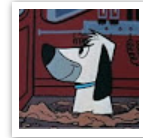
MENTION Jack Benny's name on the Paramount lot if you want to see a lot of people scowl. Sure, Jack's a comedian and is supposed to make people laugh. But he doesn't at Paramount. Not when there's even a single talent scout around. To them, the name of Jack Benny spells the name of a well-known headache tablet. The most recent reason is Carmichael.

Carmichael is more than the bear that won such a following on Jack's NBC broadcasts that Paramount decided to put him in a picture, "Buck Benny Rides Again." Carmichael personifies a Benny penchant as pleasant to the talent scout as a rasping file is to the teeth. It's a penchant for making stars out of personalities that just don't happen to exist.

Now, just when or where Mrs. Benny's boy Jack picked up his yen for invisible talent along the highway of life is as much of a mystery as why the bee didn't sting him the first time he picked up a fiddle to try to imitate it. We won't go into Benny's merits as a violinist here. Fred Allen is better qualified to tend to chilling any of Mr. Benny's hot fiddle airs. When it comes to taking the musical sting out of Mr. Benny's bee, Mr. A. is better than a surgeon's lancet. We will, however, go into the case of the invisible Benny door knock.

Anybody, even Rudy Vallee, can make a tree like Charley McCarthy pay dividends, to say nothing of making stars out of flesh-and-blood people. But even Walt Disney can't make millions of people hold their breath waiting to hear a knock on the door. And that's exactly what Mr. Benny did the first time you heard the

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 **Way Too Damn Lazy To Write A Blog**
 This Sunday, August 7th - It's Classic Cartoons - *Dealing with delightful August weather here in the Hudson Valley which has been

familiar rap and heard Benny say "Come in." And then the phrase that came to be a veritable household word, "Mr. Benny, I wish to take this opportunity . . ." WELL, that's how Mr. Benny started making stars out of ghosts, and even the late spook expert, Sir Arthur Conan Doyle, could never get as many people to give a rap for a rap.

Flushed with his early success, Mr. Benny went on to a 1921 Maxwell. He made it sound so real even the cynical Mr. Allen almost fell for the junk heap and bought it sight unseen. Mr. Benny didn't lose a cent on that Maxwell. Neither did Allen, thanks to providence. But Benny's sponsor did.

Mr. Benny's listeners wanted to see the Maxwell, and said so by the thousands. The sponsor wanted to keep selling them his products, so he had to invest in a 1921 Maxwell, which cost more than you think because 1921 Maxwells are almost as rare as Finns in Moscow.

Which brings us pretty close to the problem that confronted Paramount with Carmichael. We'll get to it as soon as we explain the enigma that is Mr. Benny. We won't say it under oath, because it might be just another Fred Allen canard.

The story is, however, that Jack likes invisible stars because he doesn't have to pay them any money to go on the air. If he doesn't have to pay them, he doesn't have to open his purse. And if he doesn't have to open his purse, there's no chance of his ever losing that moth. It's the granddaddy of all moths, they say. Jack's had it in the purse ever since he caught it in Waukegan at the turn of the century, a very rare specimen. All of which, to Paramount spelled "c-a-t-a-s-t-r-o-p-h-e."

For many weeks before he went to work on "Buck Benny," Mark Sandrich had been listening to the Benny broadcast and soaking in Benny personality and Benny gags. As prominent on the program as Rochester, and provoking almost as many laughs, was a polar bear. Its name was Carmichael. We've got to get that bear in the picture, mused Mr. Sandrich. Next day there was an executive memo on the desk of the top talent scout. "Sign Carmichael for 'Buck Benny Rides Again'." And then the fun started in earnest, with an exchange of memos that must have run something like this:

From talent scout to Mr. Sandrich: "Investigated Carmichael and found he's a bear."

From Sandrich to talent scout: "I know he's a bear. I said sign him."

From talent scout to Mr. Sandrich: "Impossible to sign Carmichael. He doesn't exist."

From Sandrich to talent scout: "Frank Capra found Shangri-La. You find me a Carmichael."

MR. SANDRICH didn't say "or else . . ." But the same day telegraph wires and long-distance phones began getting hot Stanley getting his orders to find Livingstone in darkest Africa showed no more zeal. Paramount was out to find a double, for Carmichael or bust. Specifications: "a 200-pound polar bear, gentle enough not to hurt Mr. Benny, smart enough to appreciate the fact that Rochester wasn't an enemy bear and eat him up. For five months the search continued. The only reason Paramount didn't send an expedition to the North Pole is that the animal trainer advised against it. The picture would be finished before the bear could be trained. And Buck Benny alive was worth more than a polar bear that looked like Carmichael. He was worth so much, in fact, that Paramount wouldn't trust him to stay on a real horse in the Santa Claus Lane parade on Hollywood Boulevard. He was mounted on a ferocious white animal taken from the window of a wholesale saddle shop in downtown Los Angeles. Resplendent in a silver-mounted saddle and bridle, the animal nevertheless was made of the same stuff as the now famous horse of Troy.

A couple of weeks ago, an ageing and graying Mark Sandrich sat in front of his desk and sadly surveyed the marvelous scenes he could have shot with Carmichael had there been a Carmichael to shoot. He was almost ready to give up the whole business when his secretary, Trudy Wellman, rushed in with the speed of a tropical dawn. "Mr. Sandrich, they've found him," she said.

"Dr. Livingstone, I presume," was what she swears Mr. Sandrich answered.

"No, Carmichael!"

"Carmichael?"

"Yes, Carmichael."



And there, before Mr. Sandrich's unbelieving eyes, a few days later, stood 200 pounds of polar bear doing everything but winking at the script girls and asking for a love scene in a sarong with Lamour. HIS name was Mischa, but not for long in the town where the only handicap to success is a gal's real name. He came from Clinton, Conn., but, naturally, by the way of the South Pole.

The talent scout kept his job, Mr. Sandrich's hair turned back to black and Rochester began to get slightly pale. After all, working with an invisible bear on the radio and working with one you can feel, and one that can feel you, on a movie set, are two different things. So everybody but Rochester was happy at

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Paramount but still nobody is smiling when you mention the name of Jack Benny.

The day after Carmichael was found, there was a new character introduced by Mr. Benny on his NBC program. Jack bought it for a Thanksgiving turkey and meant to invite all his friends to dinner, until Rochester discovered the bird laid eggs as big as a football and hid its head in the sand. Fans began writing in and asking for the name of the ostrich. Jack named it Trudy, in honor of Trudy Wellman. Yesterday the talent scout received a memo from Mr. Sandrich:

"I'm giving you a head start. Sign Trudy, the ostrich, for Jack Benny's next picture. I know Trudy doesn't exist, but Frank Capra found Shangri-La, so you find Trudy."

Posted by [Yowp](#) at [07:18](#)



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1 comment:



Unknown 19 July 2022 at 20:15

Sounds like a "shaggy bear" story to me.

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