

Pups is Pups

By Randy Skretvedt

It's an adventurous day for the "Our Gang" kids. Wheezer is having fun playing with five puppies, who will run after him whenever he rings the bell he carries. (Pavlov has nothing on Wheezer.) Jack has to contend with his little sister, who keeps running out of the house in her clean dress and jumping into a big mud puddle. But the big excitement is that Farina has gotten a job as a page at a swanky hotel, where the "National Pet and Dog Show" is taking place. Farina wants to share his newfound prosperity with the Gang, and promises that if they bring their pets to the show, he'll see that they win some prizes.

The day turns sad, as Wheezer loses his bell -- and his puppies, who are running around town chasing after anything else that rings. Meanwhile, Chubby's pet pig, Mary Ann's parrot and Allen's goldfish are not received fondly by the high-toned participants of the pet show, and all the juveniles and their animals are ordered out. Unfortunately, the kids' pets have run astray, and cause havoc with the dignified ladies and gentlemen of the pet society. An orchestra leader finds a bullfrog at the end of his violin bow. A lady finds a goose atop her head. Another matron, frightened by a mouse, falls into a decorative pond. Back home, little Dorothy, all neat and tidy, takes another joyous leap into the mud puddle. Her mother thinks that Farina has pushed her into the mud, but before she can scold him she falls into the deep puddle herself.

The "Our Gang" kids, particularly in the films of the early '30s, are not from affluent families. Most of them seem to be dressed in hand-me-downs that have been handed down several times before. In an era long before video games and smartphones, these kids made their own toys. Farina has concocted a drum kit out of bottles, cans and an old washtub. Mary Ann and Jack ride on a makeshift teeter-totter. Chubby is whittling something out of a



The Our Gang kids may get top billing, but these are the real stars of "Pups Is Pups." Courtesy Library of Congress Collection.

block of wood. Somehow they seem to be having a lot more fun than kids who have to depend on wi-fi.

Segregation was still commonplace in 1930. It's interesting to see the matter-of-fact way the kids acknowledge the racial separations of the time, and how they work around them. The newspaper advertises for "Ten (10) colored boys between the ages of 7 and 10 to act as pages." After Farina enthusiastically tells the Gang that he'll probably make "around two hundred bucks," Jack suggests that they all get jobs as pages. Chubby, wise to the ways of the world, says, "Aw, you can't do that! They want boys like Farina." The kids accept each other fully regardless of skin color; it's only the adults who make it an issue.

This is a more elaborate "Our Gang" short than most, with dozens of extras during the pet show scenes and a great deal of outdoor and location shooting. The setting is much more urban than usual. Instead of the usual eucalyptus trees in the background, we see the workings of factories and the storage tanks of the Diamond Oil Company. (Elaborate matte paintings also create some of the background machinery.) Many of the shots were filmed on Commercial Street between Vignes and Center Street in downtown Los Angeles, about twelve miles northeast of the Hal Roach Studios in Culver City. The wonderful scene where Wheezer emerges from the church to be reunited with his lost

puppies was filmed at St. Brendan's Church at Third Street and Van Ness Avenue.

That scene is underscored by a beautiful, haunting tune called "Religioso," composed by Leroy Shield. This is the first "Our Gang" film to feature his scores. Shield was a concert pianist in his youth. He became a record producer for the Victor Talking Machine Company and arrived at the Roach studio in early 1930 because Victor supplied its sound recording equipment. Shield spent about a year writing music at the Roach lot, and then became a music director for the NBC radio network in Chicago. His charming themes would be inserted into most of the Roach comedies for the next five years.

"Pups Is Pups" was filmed over 17 days, between April 21 and May 9, 1930. It's the twelfth "Our Gang" film in sound. (There had been 88 silent entries in the series.) In just over a year, the studio technicians had mastered the new medium of the talking film, smoothly combining visual action with charming dialogue.

This is Jackie Cooper's ninth film with the Gang; he would make six more films with them and then move to Metro-Goldwyn-Mayer, where he would soon star in *Skippy* and be nominated for an Academy Award as Best Actor in a Leading Role. He's still the youngest nominee in this category. He would continue as a very busy actor and director in movies and television through 1990. Today's audiences probably know him best as Perry White, editor of the "Daily Planet," in four of the "Superman" films.

"Farina" was Boston-born Allen Clayton Hoskins, Jr. He started with the Gang at age one, in the series' second entry, "Fire Fighters" (1922). He appeared in 105 films with the Gang, the last one being "Fly My Kite" (1931), made when he was ten. He appeared in a few films after that, but ultimately became distinguished as a psychological technician, working in Alameda, California. He died of cancer at 60 in 1980. He was Hal Roach's favorite of all the Gang kids.

Norman "Chubby" Chaney was actually older than the "fat boy" he replaced in the Gang, Joe Cobb, a secret Norman's mother kept from the studio. He made 19 films with the Gang, returned to his native Baltimore, Maryland, and sadly died of a heart infection at 21 in 1936. Bobby "Wheezer" Hutchins had been with the Gang since he was two, and appeared in 58 films in the series. In 1945 he became an air cadet, and was killed in a mid-air collision during a training exercise; he was 20. Mary Ann Jackson was already a movie veteran when she joined the Gang in 1928; she remained until 1931 and then left acting, preferring domestic life in the San Fernando Valley. She died at 80 in 2003. Dorothy DeBorba would soon be named "Echo" for her habit of repeating everything anyone else said; she would appear in 24 "Our Gang" films and ultimately work in the School of Journalism at UC Berkeley. She had reconnected with hundreds of fans by the time of her death at 85 in 2010.

Director Robert F. McGowan, known as "Uncle Bob" to the kids, had been with the series since its inception in 1922 and would direct most of the shorts through 1933. He truly enjoyed working with children, and knew how to evoke fine performances from them without making them seem mannered. "Pups Is Pups" was the start of a very special era of the "Our Gang" comedies, four or five years which were the high point of the series. Hal Roach, Bob McGowan and the kids created a legacy which continues to entertain thousands of people after more than eighty years.

The views expressed in these essays are those of the author and do not necessarily represent the views of the Library of Congress.

Randy Skretvedt is the author of Laurel and Hardy: The Magic Behind the Movies, and co-author of Steve Martin: The Unauthorized Biography, The Nostalgia Entertainment Sourcebook and Laurel and Hardy on Stage!. He was managing editor of Past Times: The Nostalgia Entertainment Newsletter, and currently hosts Forward into the Past, a weekly radio show on KSPC (www.kspc.org)