

“Fibber McGee and Molly” (March 4, 1940)

Added to the National Registry: 2007

Essay by Mickey Smith (guest post)*



The Jordans in character



Artist's rendering



Jim and Marian Jordan

On March 5, 1940, a man named Fibber McGee opened the door of his hall closet at 79 Wistful Vista and, through the wizardry of the sound effects man (and to the delight of a live studio audience), Fibber McGee's Closet entered the American vernacular. “Heavenly Days,” his wife, Molly, would have said, as she did so often throughout the 27 years of the most popular radio program of all time.

“Fibber McGee and Molly” was on the air from 1935 to 1959. Originally, it ran 30 minutes, and its popularity can be gauged by the fact that some movie theaters put the movie on hold to broadcast “Fibber” for 30 minutes on Tuesday nights! The show was later moved to 15 minutes and finally to a three-minute spot on the radio program “Monitor.”

“Fibber and Molly” were consistently funny, always wholesome and offering a variety of characters who showed up every week at their front door. Predictability and running gags were the rule. The live audience (in early years) and the radio audience pretty much knew what was coming--and couldn't wait to hear it. For those who were alive and listening in those days, no explanation is necessary. For everyone else, no explanation is really possible.

But let's try!

First, give the live audience a big hand. They blithely accepted that Beulah, the McGee's maid, was played by a white guy, Marlin Hurt, and “Teeny,” the annoying little girl next door was the voice of Marian Jordan (Molly). They also accepted, by sound effects only, the “Hall Closet.”

The Hall Closet was visited 127 times in the show, usually by mistake. That included three times by Mayor Latrivia who, as a weekly visitor, should have known where the front door was. Opening the door brought forth a cacophony of items from the interior and always a good laugh. The sound effects guy (brilliant) was acknowledged twice in a song with live music. A staged photo of the closet, can be found in Clair Schulz' book,

“Fibber McGee and Molly, 1934-1956.” One of the closet’s victims was Eddie Cantor in a guest appearance.

Two things stand out as unusual about the show. During World War II, no show was aired without some patriotic message. The D-Day Show of “Fibber” was a treasure. The broadcast aired two days after the Pearl Harbor attack and made clear that the actors and the sponsor were totally committed to the War effort that lay ahead. Molly frequently voiced a wartime message at the end of the broadcast.

As to the sponsor, it was Johnson’s Wax--a very special relationship. The sponsor was often a part of the story line. The announcer, Harlow Wilcox (whom Fibber called “Waxy”), not only pitched the sponsor’s product but often tied it to uses supportive of the War effort. In later years, the sponsor was Pet Milk. Predictably, McGee called Wilcox “Milkey.”

Fibber’s real name was Fivver. He one time revealed to Molly that his name was the result of the minister who christened him and had a cold at the time. (On one show he tried to have his name changed to Ronald because “Fibber” sounded like a prevaricator--which he was).

The format of the show was simple. One by one, the characters knocked at the door and the fun began. There were a few exceptions as when the McGee’s went to Kremer’s Drug Store where battles between McGee and Kremer invariably ensued. (There was, in fact, a *real* Kremer’s Drug Store in Michigan frequented by Don Quinn, the show’s chief writer.)

The characters at the door were rich and many:

- “DocGamble” – McGee had a variety of nicknames for him – “Tummy Thumper”
- “Teeny” – see above
- The “Old Timer” – “That ain’t the way I heard it”!
- “Ole” - no last name – heavy Swedish accent
- “Alice Darling” – rented a room during the War – air head
- “Horatio Boomer” – looking in his pocket (always) for a ticket for a cigar
- “Mrs. Carstairs” – high society, nothing but contempt for Fibber
- “Throck Morton P. Gildersleeve” – neighbor who went on to have his own popular show
- “Myrt” never seen, telephone operator, “How’s every little thing, Myrt?”

There were others as well.

A further word. In one episode, the maid, Beulah, defines inflation in three eloquent sentences! Beulah explains what she learned in night school:

Of course there's some aspects of the problem that eludes me but I got me a fairly comprehensive grasp of the basic principles. The whole concept of preventing inflation lies in the control of prices. Therefor if both the dealer and the consumer play fair with ceiling prices (a wartime phenomenon) retail prices will remain at a predetermined and reasonable level thus obviating the necessity of raising wages and production costs, which, in turn, raises prices again.

Sherman Dreyer, author of "Radio in Wartime" has written, in 1942, "Radio, which had been principally a medium of entertainment in peace time, became in war one of the great lifelines of the nation. It became a vital nerve center of communications as well as a morale builder. The challenge had been accepted, and the responsibility had been shouldered. Overnight American radio had grown up."

Certainly there are many examples of entertainers and their support of the war effort; Bob Hope comes immediately to mind. But surely the efforts of "Fibber McGee and Molly," both during the war and after, were unsurpassed.

"Fibber and Molly" were jewels in the crown of Old Time Radio. One can learn more from OTR organizations such as SPERDVAC and audiocassettes are readily available online.

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