

“No News , or What Killed the Dog”--Nat M. Wills (1908)

Added to the National Registry: 2008

Essay by Cary O'Dell



Nat M. Wills



Original label

A comedy recording by one of the foremost performers at the turn of the century, “No News, or What Killed the Dog” by Nat M. Wills was named to the National Sound Registry in 2008.

Wills (born Louis MacGrath Wills in Fredericksburg, VA, in 1873) began his theatrical career in Washington, DC, and made his Broadway debut in 1900 in the play “A Million Dollars.” Subsequent New York stage credits include roles in “The Duke of Duluth” in 1905, “The Ziegfeld Follies” in 1913, and “Cheer Up” in 1917.

Along with roles in plays, Wills also performed on stage as a tramp character, a hobo personage similar to later characterizations created or impersonated by Chaplin, Emmett Kelly and Red Skelton. Wills’ tramp featured a toothless grin, unkempt hair and a scruffy and sloppy wardrobe finished off with oversized shoes. (The costume seemed to be unfortunately strangely prophetic: Wills struggled most of his life with staggering financial debts, much of it brought on by steep alimony payments to various ex-wives.)

In or out of his tramp guise, Wills was known for his comedic monologues and parody songs, many of which he eventually recorded for the Victor label including “Saving Up Coupons for Mother” (where a son has a novel way of paying for his father’s burial) and “BPOE [Best People on Earth]: Elk’s Song.” By far, however, his most famous and popular recording was his short routine “No News, or What Killed the Dog.”

“No News” tells the tale of a wealthy man ordered by his doctor to undertake a respite, away from family and the stresses of daily life. He even orders his servants to share with him no news—via letter or telegram--during his six week sabbatical. His health eventually restored, the man returns home, inquiring of his “colored” servant, “Henry,” what, if anything, he has missed.

“Henry” then relates that there “ain’t no news,” save for “one little thing,” the fact that the owner’s dog has died. The man then requests a few more details. What follows then is a string of calmly recounted comic misadventures which both explains and illuminates the passing of the family pooch. Piling on top of the dog’s demise is a series of generally worsening domestic disasters from burnt-down buildings to suddenly deceased relatives, all recounted with a sort of *laissez faire* air. It’s a comedic crescendo, one whose power comes from its gradually mounting, cumulative catastrophes, not dissimilar in form from the humorous folk song “There Was An Old Woman Who Swallowed a Fly” or even Mother Goose’s “The House That Jack Built.” It is a style of humor that has been employed, in both music and monologues, for years. Of late, such

stand-up comics as Sandra Bernhard and Ellen DeGeneris have both made use of it with their quirky, often fanciful, sometimes rambling tales which border on playlets or soliloquies.

The routine/recording is a two-person conversation—the employer and his servant. Both are voiced by Wills. While the wealthy employer's is Wills' "normal" voice, his "colored" servant's dialect, however, is affected in a way that was sadly typical of the minstrel-type vocalizations popular in vaudeville at that time.

In any event, it is certainly the servant's rather detached retelling, as much as the comedic events themselves, which account for many of yuks the piece produces for its audience. One is actually left wondering what is the motive behind the servant's less-than-completely-forthcoming recounting of recent events? Does he lack a sense of import and priority regarding these home-based snafus? Or is his roundabout way of telling these details an attempt to absolve him of some hidden guilt? Or is he good natured and even a humanitarian, an attempt to lessen the stress felt by his employer, who might still be in a "delicate" condition?

In some ways, the structure of "No News, or What Killed the Dog" is highly reminiscent of the steps in a professional magician's or conjurer's trick. There is a *pledge* (the presentation of something that seems ordinary i.e. there is "no news"); the *turn* (where the "ordinary" becomes un-ordinary i.e. the dog has died) and the *prestige* (the unexpected payoff, in this case, the long litany of other events and travails). "No News" is also similar in some ways to its fellow Sound Registry selection, DeWolf Hopper's "Casey at the Bat" from 1906, which also builds in its narrative and then concludes surprisingly.

At the time of its release, Wills' "No News" was a best-seller. It secured Wills' place as one of America's foremost clowns, monologists and parodists. Had he not died prematurely in 1917 from carbon monoxide poisoning, he would, today, no doubt, be better remembered and, perhaps, even considered on par with such renowned talents as Will Rogers.

Though "No News" may not have been the first comedy routine of this type to be told (or retold), its focus on the unexpected, its slight surrealism and Rube Goldberg logic, helped lay the groundwork for innumerable future radio and TV comedy routines, perhaps most notably evident in the work of radio innovator and provocateur Stan Freberg.

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