

RADIO RECALL

August 2017, Volume 34, No. 4



THE DAY LOU COSTELLO CRIED ON RADIO

The date was November 4, 1943. Lou Costello was rehearsing at the studios of NBC with the cast and crew, including Bud Abbott, Mel Blanc, Ken Niles and the beautiful Lana Turner, when an emissary of NBC walked in and gave Costello the shocking news that his one-year-old son had drowned at their Van Nuys home. Lou Costello, Jr., nicknamed "Butch," escaped his playpen, crawled to the swimming pool and fell in. Costello immediately sped from the studio to his home while a pulmotor squad worked futilely to bring back a spark of life to the youngster.

As Costello later recalled in 1954: "Racing into the yard, [my wife] ran to the swimming pool and found the child floating face-down in water a foot and one-half deep. She pulled him from the water and screamed for help." Neighbors rushed over when they heard the screams and firefighters and medics worked over the boy for more than an hour before Dr. Vincent Kovner pronounced him dead. The baby drowned two days shy of his first birthday.

Driving home from the studio Costello was in denial, convinced that his son was still alive, because he was playing with his baby boy only hours prior. He even told the infant, nicknamed "Butch," that he would hear his father over the radio speaker that evening. The comedian arrived at his home just as the firefighters were leaving, and discovered the news was true. Meanwhile, at the studio, producer Martin Gosch and Costello's partner, Bud Abbott, started making calls for a substitute. Everyone, cast and crew, understood that Costello could not bear up under such grief and go through with a slapstick comedy show.



Contact was made with Mickey Rooney, who was on a golf course at the time. After learning the news Rooney tossed aside the clubs, sped to his car and raced to the NBC studio, under the impression that the broadcast time was 5:30 instead of 7:00. He arrived shortly after five and began looking over the script. Even when Costello arrived at the studio, reportedly 25 minutes before airtime, Rooney took a chair with other members of the cast and followed every line in the script, sitting on standby in case Costello needed to be replaced. (During the afternoon Bob Hope, Jimmy Durante and Red Skelton heard the sad news and offered to take over for Costello.)

In the tradition of the theatre, "the show must go on," was deeply ingrained in Costello through his long years in show business, and most rationalized that was the motivation running through his mind. Even in his great grief he must have steeled himself against quitting, as the spirit of the trouper would call it. It was less than an hour before the Camel sign-in when Bud Abbott was called to the phone. It was Costello, telling him he would be there to go through with the show. He arrived at the studio a half-hour later and went through a final reading of his script. When Ken Niles signed in the show, Costello was in front of the mike, smoking a cigar and fidgeting with his script to contain his heartbreak.

None in the studio audience that overflowed onto the stage was aware of what Costello was going through. He gave no outward evidence of his great loss, ad-libbing quips and carrying on in the same old Costello way. The crowd howled at his gags, but as he read



the last line and tossed his script to a WAVE in the front row, Lou Costello broke down with tears moments before the closing commercial and supposedly rushed off the stage.

Following the announcer's closing commercial, Bud Abbott stepped up to the mike to explain to the audience: "Ladies and gentlemen. Now that our program is over and we have done our best to entertain you, I would like take a moment to pay tribute to my best friend and to a man who has more courage than I have ever seen displayed in the theater. Tonight the old expression 'The show must go on' was brought home to all of us on this program. More clearly than ever before. Just a short time before our broadcast started, Lou Costello was told that his baby, one year old tomorrow, had died. In the face of the greatest tragedy which can come to any man, Lou Costello went on tonight so that you, the radio audience, would not be disappointed. There is nothing more that I can say except that I know you, all of you, [will] join me in expressing our deepest sympathy to a great trouper."

If Bud Abbott had not apprised the audience of the tragedy that befell his partner three hours before broadcast, it is doubtful whether the average radio listener would have even suspected that there had been anything amiss about the show or its principals. Costello lost his place and ad-libbed a little more often than was his habit. What the nationwide audience was not aware was the sobs that were audible through the audience as the people left the auditorium following a three-minute silent tribute. Asked if Costello at any time had shown signs of cracking, Gosch replied to a reporter, "It was the greatest display of courage I've ever seen. Lou took it like the great trouper he is." At one point in the script where Costello read, "I feel sad today," there were dewy eyes on the stage. He closed it quickly with "I broke up with my girl today." A less stoic performer would have asked for other lines.

It was the second misfortune to overtake that particular broadcast. The day before the broadcast, Veronica Lake, who had been booked as guest star, had to cancel on account of illness. Lana Turner was substituted. The actress, unable to suppress her own grief over Costello's loss, read her lines woodenly and hardly above a whisper. In the audience were 25 convalescents from rheumatic fever with their nurses, brought there from the naval hospital at Corona as special guests of Lou Costello. He insisted that the party he had planned for them after the show be carried through, even though he could not attend.

Whether Costello, under the circumstances, should have appeared on the radio broadcast is a moot point. The cast went through the entire script but once and there was no opportunity for a dress rehearsal or final

timing. For years a recording of the November 4, 1943, broadcast has been sought after by fans of Bud Abbott and Lou Costello, not widely available to collectors for decades. Of recent, transcription discs were found and that very recording is now making the rounds among collectors. Some might consider the recording morbid but nothing could be further from the truth. Only at the close of the broadcast when Bud Abbott delivers his closing speech does it become apparent that the broadcast was monumental – now historical.

Listening to the recording today one wonders why, at the close of the broadcast, you can hear a reaction from those in attendance during Abbott's second sentence... before he even mentions the death of Costello's little son. I wonder if, when Abbott stepped out to address the audience, that was the moment Costello broke down and had to walk off the stage - - not after he concluded his final line. Else, why would the audience react at that moment?

Regarding the reason why Costello wanted to perform during a time of grievance, the comedian was off the air for nine months as a result of rheumatic fever (hence why he set up a party after the broadcast for rheumatic fever victims). It may be possible, because this was the first broadcast of the season and the first broadcast since he was back to health, that he felt a necessity to commit to the radio mike. Costello however, many years later, recalled bouncing his little boy on his knee earlier in the day and telling Butch that he would hear his father on the radio... and wanted to keep that promise.

CLUB NEWS: IMPORTANT REMINDER



A reminder that club dues are due if you have not yet sent them in to Joanie Ferrell Langdon.

\$20 for locals

\$15 for seniors and people who do not live locally.

Your membership dues provides you with six newsletters every year. You can send your membership dues to: Joanie Ferrell Langdon

926 South Fairfax Street

Alexandria, VA 22314

If you have any questions, call John at 703-780-4824

A LETTER FROM THE EDITOR

As I type this quick letter to you, the reader, I find myself listening to a radio episode of *The Abbott and Costello Show*. Today the comedians are best remembered for a series of motion-pictures produced by Universal Studios. Few remember that they caught the eye (and ear) of executives at Universal for their weekly radio appearances on *The Kate Smith Show* and fewer are aware of the 1943 Holy Grail – the night Lou Costello appeared before the microphone, hours following the death of his one-year-old son, Butch. The recording was not known to exist until recently when two sets of discs were discovered and transferred to CD. That is the episode I am listening to right now. I had to verify the validity of the recording before acknowledging existence, and was reminded that while recordings of radio broadcasts are entertaining, the behind-the-scenes history of the programs is equally so, if not more. The article in this issue is one of many examples how we should always take time to read up on the history of old-time radio, along with the collective aspect. I am also open to any submissions you want to send my way. (I received a couple last month, thank you!)

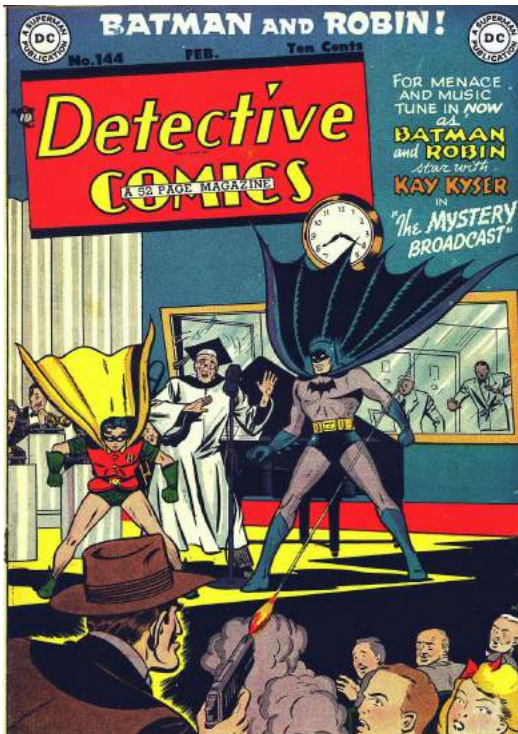
My e-mail address is provided below.

Martin Grams, Jr. martingramsjr@icloud.com



OLD-TIME RADIO IN THE COMICS

By Steven Thompson



Detective Comics # 144 (February, 1949)

Behind Superman was the second most popular-selling comic of all time. Batman was came in at number two as the most popular superhero in the nation and his adventures with Robin, “the Boy Wonder,” were still going strong even as superhero characters started dying off at other companies. So popular was Batman that he appeared twice monthly in two separate comic books: *Batman* and *Detective Comics*. But did you know Kay Kyser, bandleader of motion-pictures and radio’s popular *College of Musical Knowledge*, was featured in one of the issues?

In “The Mystery Broadcast,” Kay Kyser appears in comic form, dressed in a dark cap and gown rather than his characteristic off-white one and with none of his famous co-stars such as singer Harry Babbitt or comic Ish Kabibble. The theory at DC Comics was that having Kay Kyser on the front cover of *Detective Comics* would increase newsstand sales.

A gangster on the run hides out in Kyser’s band and Kay sends out a musical S.O.S that gets picked up and interpreted by Bruce Wayne and Dick Grayson—Batman and Robin. The Caped Crusader then appears on Kay’s quiz show where—although hopelessly un-hep—he ultimately wins with the surreptitious help of his young sidekick, causing the villain to make a break for it. Batman and Kay are trapped and left to die only to have the Ol’ Professor save the Dark Knight and the day!





Fay Wray in *King Kong* (1933)

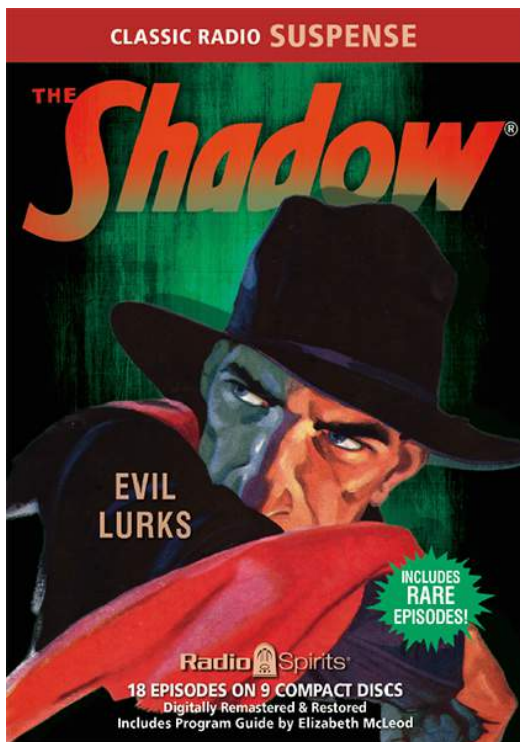
● Fay Wray's daughter, Victoria, is finishing a biography about her mother and father. In 1942, Fay Wray married Robert Riskin, a screenwriter whose work may have been partial influence for Wray becoming a writer herself. A fan of *The Halls of Ivy* radio program, Wray wrote at least two radio scripts that were produced with Ronald Colman and Benita Hume in the leads. Victoria is seeking any radio programs featuring her mother, preferably on CD and not mp3 format. If anyone has any they would like to contribute, drop the ol' editor a line and he will make sure they are forwarded to her – and your name will be included so she will know who was responsible for sending them to her.

● Good news. The Texas Museum of Broadcasting and Communications recently opened their doors to the public and launched a website for people who want to take a virtual tour. After more than 30 years of collecting vintage broadcast equipment and memorabilia, the website provides potential visitors a general idea of what archival materials is on display. Located at 416 East Main Street in downtown Kilgore, Texas, the website is <http://www.txmbc.org/>

● *Suspense*, "Radio's Outstanding Theater of Thrills," has returned from the great beyond in this revival by Blue Hours Productions. With a mix of original scripts and adaptations of classic works, all performed by a crack company of Hollywood actors and supplemented with music and real-life sound effects, these new *Suspense* productions are licensed through CBS (making this an official return to radio since the program went off the air in 1962) and captures the feel of radio's "Golden Age" without being an imitation. Over 80 productions have been produced and many are available for listening free online at <http://www.prx.org/series/33182-suspense>

● The Furnace Creek Inn, the famous vacation resort in the heart of Death Valley, will reopen this fall with a new look – and a new name. The former Furnace Creek Resort will be called the Oasis at Death Valley. Formerly owned by the Pacific Coast Borax Company, sponsors of radio's *Death Valley Days*, it was not uncommon to hear a sales pitch/reminder from the radio announcer at the close of every radio broadcast from October to December, reminding radio listeners that the Furnace Creek Inn was the vacation-destination during the holiday season. So hot is Death Valley that the Inn was open only during the winter months (October to May). Most radio listeners were aware that the Inn was owned by the radio sponsor. The \$50 million makeover adds 22 new luxury casitas to the inn, among other extensions, and will be open year-round. In recent news an advertising agency was paid \$2 million to create a new name for the Bob Hope Airport, with the belief that Bob Hope's name no longer lent prestige to the California airport. The new name is now the Burbank Airport. It seems radio history will continue to make way for progress... and no amount of wisdom from The Old Ranger (host of *Death Valley Days*) can prevent this.

RECENT “DISC”OVERIES



Last month Radio Spirits released their latest offering of commercially-licensed Shadow products including a nine-CD box set containing 18 half-hour episodes. This new set, subtitled “Evil Lurks,” contains 11 episodes never available to collectors or fans until now. One with Orson Welles and the remaining 10 with William Johnstone. The remaining seven episodes in the box set have been available for decades but are upgrades transferred directly from transcription disc and run through the latest of audio software. That makes this set a “must-have” for fans of *The Shadow* radio program. For your reference the list of “lost” episodes now available is listed below:

Cold Death (December 19, 1937)

The Diamond Murders (October 8, 1939)

a.k.a. Murder at the Ballpark

Village of Doom (October 15, 1939)

The Dragon’s Tongue Murders (October 12, 1941)

The Devil’s Hour (October 26, 1941)

The Organ Played at Midnight (November 9, 1941)

Death Imported (December 21, 1941)

Death Pulls the Strings (January 4, 1942)

The Drums of Doom (January 11, 1942)

The Thing in the Swamp (January 18, 1942)

Dead Man’s Revenge (January 25, 1942)

THANK YOU, RADIO SPIRITS

Over the past five years, Radio Spirits has been responsible for the release of thousands of un-circulated old-time radio programs. Over 200 episodes of *The Green Hornet*, dozens of Red Skelton programs, more than 40 *George Burns and Gracie Allen* broadcasts, an almost complete run of *The Phil Harris and Alice Faye* program, and numerous episodes of *The Man From Homicide*, *Big Town*, *Duffy’s Tavern*, *Mr. District Attorney*, *Nick Carter*, *Master Detective*, *Somebody Knows* and many others. Consider supporting them in their endeavors by purchasing a couple of their box sets today. Your purchase will also ensure the continued release of un-circulated “lost” radio programs.

www.radiospirits.com

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- Pres: Bert Rude, 8611 Beechnut Ct., Ellicott City, MD, 21043, 410-480-8109 <president@mwotrc.com>
- V.P: Sally Stephens, 8803 Westwood Dr, Vienna, VA 22182, 703-328-3789 <programs@mwotrc.com >
- Treasurer and Membership: Janie Ferrell Langdon, 926 S. Fairfax St., Alexandria, VA 22314, 703-549-8594 <membership@mwotrc.com >
- PrintNideo Library: M&M Bush, 6437 Fifth St, Alexandria, VA 22312, 703-354-7852, <library@mwotrc.com>
- Audio Library: Rebecca Jones, P.O. Box 638, Walkersville, MD 21793-0638 <audio@mwotrc.com>
- Editor: Martin Grams, P.O. Box 52, Whiteford, MD 21160, <martingramsjr@icloud.com>
- GRTR: Mark Anderson, 928 Patton Dr., Carlisle PA 17013, 717-706-3105 <grtr@mwotrc.com>
- Webmaster: John Abbott, 312 Scholastic Court, Winston-Salem, NC 27106 <Webmaster@mwotrc.com>
- Archivist: Michael Hayde, 7618 Somerset Ln, Manassas, VA 20111, 331-0714 <treasurer@mwotrc.com>

MWOTRC was created in 1984 by Jim Burnette (1945-2001), our President Emeritus. Annual dues \$20 to locals and \$15 to others, and seniors. Regular meetings are held at Trinity Episcopal Church, Columbia Pike and Wayne St, Arlington, VA the second Friday evening of every month, except June and December, when meetings are held Saturday noon at a local restaurant TBA.

UP-COMING EVENTS

September 14 to 16, 2017 The Mid-Atlantic Nostalgia Convention

Hunt Valley Delta Marriott (formerly named Wyndham Hotel) in Hunt Valley, Maryland. Among the celebrity guests this year are: Aileen Quinn (from *Annie*), Dawn Wells (from *Gilligan's Island*), Maud Adams (Bond girl from *Octopussy*), Lee Aaker (from TV and radio's *The Adventures of Rin-Tin-Tin*), Erik Estrada and Larry Wilcox (*Chips*), Paul Petersen (*The Donna Reed Show*), Gary Conway (*Burke's Law* and *Land of the Giants*), Tommy Cook (*The Adventures of Red Ryder*), Patrick Duffy (*The Man From Atlantis* and *Dallas*), Cindy Williams (*Laverne and Shirley*) and Shirley Jones (*The Partridge Family*), among others. Attend seminars on old-time radio, pulp magazines, vintage television, classic movies, and more. Large vendor area. Over 3,500 people attended last year.

For more information: 443-286-6821 or visit <http://midatlanticnostalgiaconvention.com/>

October 7, 2017 The Happy Trails Film Festival

Held at the Holiday Inn in Roanoke, Virginia, this one-day film festival salutes the days when cowboys were role models to look up to. Roy Rogers, Gene Autry, Charles Starrett and many others. Twelve celebrities have been confirmed including the daughter of Roy Rogers. Vintage cowboy westerns will be screened in a movie room, vendors, panels and more. There is no official website for the event except on Facebook, but you can call them on the phone at (540) 389-9400 for more information.

<https://www.facebook.com/Happy-Trails-Virginia-Style-event-October-7-2017-1541899332801398/>

November 4, 2017 Pulp Adventurecon

One day vendor venue with fifty tables of various books, pulps, magazines and other retro pop culture. Located at the Ramada Inn off exit 7 off the New Jersey Turnpike (I-95). 10 am to 5 pm.

<http://www.boldventurepress.com/pacon1.html>



“THE SMALL HOUSE HALFWAY UP THE NEXT BLOCK”



Vic and Sade was written by the prodigious Paul Rhymer for the entire length of its long run (1932 – 1946). The principal characters were a married couple living in “the small house halfway up in the next block.” After the first weeks in production an extra character, an adopted son, was added to the show, and it was in this format, with only three characters, that the program thrived and won many awards for the writer, actors and sponsor.

The town in which Vic and Sade live is named only once, in passing through a humorous credit in one episode (“Sade’s gowns by Yamilton’s Department Store — Crooper, Illinois”), over the course of the entire series, as far as it is known from existing scripts and recordings.

The town is based on a vaguely fictionalized version of Normal, Illinois, where Rhymer grew up. Radio fan Rodney Bowcock happened to be in the area recently and through archival digging, found the house on Virginia Avenue in Normal, Illinois, just next to Prospect Street. In case you wanted to know what the front porch looked like that Vic, Sade and Rush frequently sat and “talked about nothing,” here is a photo taken by Rodney.



Besides the presentation of the Metro Washington Old-Time Radio Club on Saturday morning/afternoon, this year's Mid-Atlantic Nostalgia Convention contains a number of old-time radio events worthy of traveling to Hunt Valley, Maryland.

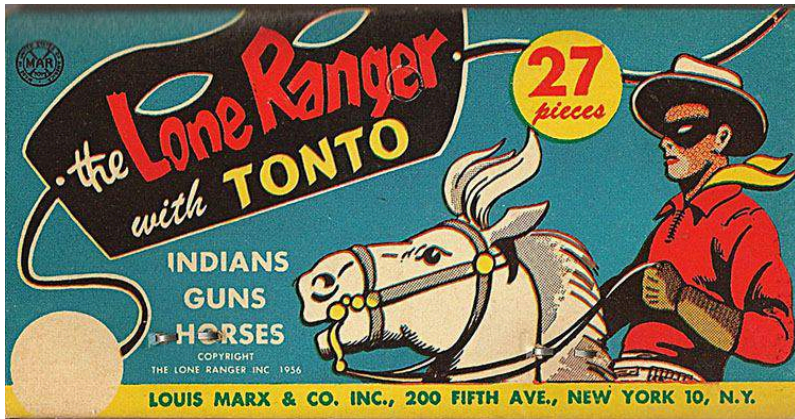
On Thursday, September 14, the Gotham Radio Players will be performing a "lost" episode of *Tales of the Texas Rangers* titled "Strange Confession," originally broadcast January 28, 1951. A recording of that episode is not known to exist in recorded form. On Thursday evening, author and film historian Ed Hulse will discuss the various incarnations of *The Shadow* as the omnipresent crime fighter appeared on

radio, television and motion-pictures. On Friday morning, author Martin Grams will present a slide show documenting the history of radio's *Renfrew of the Mounted*, a Canadian Mountie series that pre-dated Sergeant Preston, and was the major influence for a weekly children's program promoting the health benefits of Wonder Bread. Also a highlight of the weekend... anyone who wants to try out for an old-time radio re-enactment on stage has an opportunity on Friday afternoon, with a performance of another "lost" old-time radio program.

On Saturday, Steve Darnall, editor of Chuck Schaden's *Nostalgia Digest*, will present a look at the role radio played in promoting songs – and song writers – whose work shaped The Great American Songbook, with samples of rare radio performances by George Gershwin and Cole Porter. Joe Webb will follow with a brief history of radio's *Suspense*, looking closely at the various incarnations (East Coast vs. West Coast broadcasts), AFRS vs. CBS network feeds, recent transcription disc finds, collector upgrades, recent discoveries of "lost" episodes and much more for the serious collector.

The Mid-Atlantic Nostalgia Convention also doubles as a film festival, screening rare movies and TV broadcasts on the big screen. This year's offerings include rarely-seen motion-pictures including *Here Come the Nelsons* (1952), *The Life of Riley* (1949), *The Whistler* (1944), and TV classics such as *Bachelor Father* and *Make Room for Daddy* (both 1958, both with Jack Benny in the cast), and the 1949 *You Bet Your Life* television pilot which was never telecast – an hour-long film made while an episode of the radio program was being recorded! Over 100 vendor tables and a dozen Hollywood celebrities including radio's Tommy Cook, Paul Petersen, Shirley Jones, Patrick Duffy, Erik Estrada, Dawn Wells, Cindy Williams, Lee Aaker, Belinda Montgomery, Tammy Locke, Gary Conway, Larry Wilcox and Larry Storch, among others. For more information, **visit www.MidAtlanticNostalgiaConvention.com** or call 443-286-6821. If you are a member of the MWOTR Club, you have extra reasons to consider attending the monthly club meeting this year!

PLOT SUMMARIES FOR “LOST” LONE RANGER RADIO BROADCASTS



Many fans of *The Lone Ranger* radio program are aware that the first 790 or so episodes do not exist in recorded form. For your amusement, here are plot summaries from some of the Masked Man's earliest adventures, which do not exist in recorded form.

Episode #20, Broadcast March 16, 1933

Plot: In the early days, it took very little in the way of a rumor to start chaos in the vicinity of one of the small struggling banks in a western community, but that is exactly what happened when Slim is rejected a loan from the new bank. Most of the town folk are reluctant to invest their money in the brick-and-mortar institution, especially since Angus Tavish, the biggest rancher in Sleepy Creek, has not invested his own money. The Lone Ranger and Tonto, aware that Big Stan Clavin, the bank manager, has been embezzling small amounts and was responsible for the close of a bank in San Francisco, waits until a robber digs up the money in Clavin's back yard. The Lone Ranger steals the \$10,000 and turns the thief over to the sheriff. When Slim informs the town citizens about the failure of the San Francisco bank, a riot erupts until The Lone Ranger assists Angus Tavish in depositing \$10,000 into the bank. The town citizens, now assured of their investments, begin to make deposits – a sound foundation for the financial institution. At the end of the day, Tavish informs the Clavin that the stolen money is now returned where it belonged and quietly, without the citizens aware, establishes a real account with the bank.

Episode #21, Broadcast March 18, 1933

Plot: Barney Oldfield and Jake Blossom plot to have Steve, an innocent railroad worker, destroy the Gopher Gulch bridge which is near completion. If the bridge is destroyed, Maxwell would lose the contract for the construction work and Jake would be quite sure of obtaining it. Barney tricks Steve into thinking that Duke Atterbury, the owner of the railroad, was responsible for the death of Steve's sister, and that the train going across the bridge would have Atterbury on board. Tonto overhears Barney and Jake's discussion and The Lone Ranger intercepts Steve before he could go down with the bridge that was blown up. Barney, discovering he was provided a ten second fuse, not a ten minute fuse, realizes he was duped. Head bent low, The Lone Ranger on the great horse Silver, swept over the country following the rails of the newly laid track, hoping to catch up with the approaching train that was unaware of the destruction at the Gopher Gulch bridge, carrying Duke Atterbury. When the conductor ignores the warnings of the Masked Man, The Lone Ranger shoots through the pistons to allow the steam to escape, saving the lives of Steve's sister, who was married to Duke Atterbury.

FIRST CLASS

— Published by MWOTRC —
Membership Chairman:
Joanie Ferrell Langdon
926 South Fairfax Street
Alexandria, VA 22314

RADIO RECALL



Shirley Temple

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IN THIS ISSUE

The Home of Vic & Sade

**“Lost” Episodes of
The Shadow found!**

**The Day Lou Costello
Cried on Radio**