TURN THE RADIO ON

In the late 1930's and the '40's, our radio took up almost as much space as the dining room table. To a seven year old this enormous maple box looked like a person: two dial knobs for eyes, a glass that held the numbers of the stations for a nose, and a large brown fabric "O" mouth out of which came the voices that drew us in day after day and night after night. Early in 1942, Dad, an attorney, enlisted in the Army Air Force. After Officers Training Camp he was assigned as legal officer to the Army Air Base in Jackson, Mississippi.

In the Spring of 1942, Mother packed the 1939 Plymouth, added my sister, Patty, and me, and we set off for Jackson. When we arrived, our Northwest Iowa accents marked us as damn Yankees in the Heart of the Confederacy. The only people who talked like us came out of that big box.

I knew all those voices belonged to people who lived close, very close, otherwise we couldn't hear them so clearly. The back of the radio was filled with tubes of all sizes. Everybody lived in there. Radio people were small, really small, with big heads. Those tubes were apartment houses. Each apartment house had an elevator and a doorman. When their time came, the doorman took the elevator up to the correct apartment, roused the folks, and took them to the stage in back of the big mouth where they spoke clearly and loud enough for us to hear.

As a program began I'd dash around to the back of the radio in hopes of catching those tiny folks in action. No matter how fast I moved, I never quite got there in time to see them.

But I knew sure as I knew there was a Santa Claus, they were there. I just wasn't fast enough.

In the Mississippi of 1942, '43, and '44, "Amos and Andy" presented a problem. It was clear, very clear, that they could not live in the apartments. Neither could Rochester from "The Jack Benny Show." After spending much time looking at the tube/apartment houses, I came up with a solution. There was a smaller tube, a bit apart from the rest, and that's where those folks had their apartments. Mississippi living demanded it.

Gabriel Heatter began his news broadcasts, "There's good news tonight" even if there wasn't. Dad sometimes listened to H. V. Kaltenborn, the man who knew the news. Every night, we gathered around the radio and listened in to a world far beyond the walls of 310 Dunbar Street, Jackson, Mississippi.

Sunday afternoon at 4:30 belonged to Dad. He insisted on absolute quiet so "The Shadow" could prove to the world, once again, that he knew 'the evil that lurked in the heart of men.' Sunday nights, Jack Benny, Mary Livingston, Rochester, and the Irish tenor, Dennis Day were rousted out about suppertime. Dennis Day hit high notes that thrilled Mother and annoyed Dad. Edgar

Bergan, Charlie McCarthy, and Mortimer Snerd followed. Every Sunday night, Mother announced, "Charlie says, 'Mr. Bergen moves his lips.' " "Allen's Alley" ended the evening, especially the night one of the folks said to Fred Allen, "Fred, that pink apron is the same color as your eyes." Mother looked at Dad's bloodshot eyes and switched the radio off. Fred, along with the folks from the alley, was not allowed back in our house for a couple of weeks.

"The Life of Riley," "Fibber McGee and Molly," George Burns and Gracie Allen, Art Linkletter's show, "People Are Funny," "Lux Radio Theater," "Inner Sanctum," every night we listened to the radio, put together a puzzle, embroidered, knitted, or did homework. Once a week "The First Nighter" took us to Broadway. Once when"Amos and Andy" took a trip in their taxi. Amos asked, "How far is it to *somewhere*?" Andy's answer, "About a quarter of an inch on this map." Our family borrowed this line for almost every car trip.

I commandeered the after school programs for only me. "Tom Mix," "The Lone Ranger" with "Hi Ho Silver," Gene Autry, Roy Rogers and Dale Evans, "Jack Armstrong, the All-American Boy," all involved guns and shooting. Never sure when a bullet might zoom out of that fabric screen, I needed to protect my life. Every afternoon, home from school just before these programs began, I raced into my parent's bedroom, snatched the chenille spread off their bed, and wrapped myself from head to toe as I settled down in front of the radio. Encased in chenille I was spellbound by adventures booming out of that huge radio mouth.

Every afternoon, Monday through Friday, when Mother returned from Officer's Wives' Red Cross bandage rolling, sock knitting, or something involving bridge or church, she'd whip off my chenille armor and put it neatly back on their bed. I'd race in, whip it back off, and re-wrap myself. I'd explain this was saving my life. I could be killed by a stray bullet at any moment. Mother glared and explained back that nobody lived in those radio tubes, that sound effects were the cause of gunshots, airplanes, horses, and the opening of Jack Benny's safe. I

presented my case more clearly and much more loudly. She'd turn off the radio, remove my chenille shell, and sigh. A very loud sigh. Sometimes she'd mutter, "Why is 'Buster Brown and His Dog, Tige only on on Saturday morning?'" I'd look down at my Buster Brown shoes and mutter, "Boring Buster Brown." "Let's Pretend" sponsored by Cream of Wheat moved Saturday morning dusting quickly but none too accurately.

Summertime when the livin' was easy and the cotton was high opened my world to the wonder and romance of soap operas. "Ma Perkins," "Stella Dallas, Backstage Wife," "The Romance of Helen Trent," "Portia Faces Life," offered lives lived, loves lost, the way life would be if only we lived in an apartment house like the ones in the back of the radio only much larger. A summer of unsupervised soap operas between second and third grade, and I understood love and loss, as only an eight year old could. For me, love meant Henry La Beeche, blonde, tall, handsome, in third grade. We rode the same city bus to Cathedral Grade School and Sister Mary Monica's classroom. We'd sit together on the bus. Henry didn't listen to soap operas. He had no idea about lives lived and loves lost. But I had hope. I hoped Henry would ask me out for dinner. I'd wear a black strapless formal held up by invisible tape. And I'd wear elbow length white gloves. These presented a serious problem. How could I eat French Fries with catsup and keep the gloves clean? I thought about this to the detriment of the multiplication tables times 6 and 7. Finally, I asked Mother. Her answer, "Use a fork."

Radio ruled our house until 1953 when Dad finally broke down and brought home a black and white television set. By then radio had changed. No more tubes. No more apartments, but I was

not ready to give on the tiny folks with the big mouths who made radio real.

In October 2007, Wayne Eddy interviewed me on the Northfield station KYMN. We talked about radio and I explained to him about the face on the big radio, the apartment houses, thelevators, the tiny people with the big mouths, and Wayne assured me and all his listeners, "Yes, that's exactly how radio works."