

# The Wit and Humor of Red Skelton

Dr. Alfred S. Brothers, Jr.

27 January 2017

# Red Skelton

## Introduction

Red Skelton was a household name and he entertained us in our living rooms weekly as a family. His story is a rags-to-riches story, complete with a long and creative career and life. I consider Red Skelton as the man of many faces and a master of them all.

Skelton was a man for all seasons. His career extended from burlesque, vaudeville and theater to movies, radio, and television. He is a multi generational figure spanning over 70 years of entertaining America and the world. He had one of the longest running programs on television that lasted for more than 17 years on both the NBC and CBS networks.

One of Red's most interesting opportunities was as Master of Ceremony for President Franklin Roosevelt's Luncheons. [Marx, 3]

'Red was invited to the White House Luncheon to entertain in honor of President Roosevelt's birthday in 1940. Midway through the proceedings, Red interrupted a Presidential toast by grabbing FDR's glass. "Careful what you drink, Mr. President," he warned, "I once got rolled in a joint like this." Roosevelt roared appreciatively, and until he died always insisted that Skelton emcee the annual Presidential birthday luncheons." [Marx, 3, 70-71, Gehring, 78-79]

Red Skelton's mom told him, "Son, don't take life too seriously. You'll never get out of it alive." [Marx, 4]

One of the challenges when researching Red Skelton is that there are multiple life stories and incidents which do not at all directly agree. This was the man, enigmatic, charming, funny, larger than life yet truly unknown. The sources in some cases do not agree on the stories, but all do agree about the stature and impact of the man.

"Comedy is taking the everyday and slightly exaggerating it," Said Red Skelton in 1986. [B-xxi] Red Skelton was a consummate comedian.

Now on to our program for today:

### ***The Wit and Humor of Red Skelton***

Richard Bernard Skelton was born on July 18, 1913 in Vincennes Indiana. He is the son of Ida Mae Skelton, his mother, who was born in Lincoln, Nebraska and father, Joseph Skelton born in Princeton, Indiana. His parents met when his father's circus, the Hagenbeck and Wallace Circus, played in Lincoln one summer. His parents married in 1905 and settled in Vincennes,

Indiana. His father owned a grocery store, and died two months before Red Was born. His mother was left with nothing after the death of Joseph and worked as charwoman in the local Vaudeville Theater to make ends meet. She also took in washing, and cleaned homes and businesses. She still had four young children to raise. Red had three older brothers and was the only one with red hair. He received his nickname from the color of his hair. According to Arthur Marx, Red's mother recalls telling Dr. Beckus, who attended her, "Hurry Doc, I want my baby to be born before his brothers come home from school." She also commented, "Red was a good boy; he arrived on time". [Gehring, 1; Marx, 4-5]

There is some question as to Red's true birth date. Some recount it as 1913, others including Red at times as 1906. It was listed as 1913 on birth certificate, army discharge, marriage licenses and his passport. I suggest that 1913 is the true date. It may be that he gave an earlier date when he applied for various jobs. Don Ferris, musical arranger and piano accompanist for Red said, he told me "I have one age for newspapers and one for reality". [Marx, 5] Herein, lies some of the mystery of the Red Skelton story.

There is a story about Red's introduction and love for theater, the circus and entertaining. When Red was 10 years old he was selling newspapers to help raise money for his family. "The story begins with Skelton selling newspapers in front of the theater where [Ed] Wynn's stage show was booked. A stranger asked the youngster," 'what do you do for excitement in this town?' the boy politely replied, 'well, sir, we've got a big show coming into the theater tonight. You could go to that.' When the stranger asked if he was going to attend, Skelton said he had newspapers to sell. The man bought all of the newspapers, to ensure that the youngster saw the show.' Years later Skelton concluded this anecdote by adding, "I'll never forget how surprised I was that night to see that the guy who had bought all my papers was the star of the show." [Gehring, 22] Red said later that he thanked Ed Wynn for making his attendance possible and shared with him that he had decided to become a comedian because of that experience.

Wes. D. Gehring in his book entitled, "Red Skelton, The Man Behind The Mask", published by the Indiana Historical Society, noted that there was no evidence that the story ever took place or that Ed Wynn ever stopped in Vincennes. [Gehring, 22]

Arthur Marx, the son of Groucho Marx, in his book, "Red Skelton", which he claimed was an unauthorized biography, shares essentially the same story with Ed Wynn.

In "The Life of Red Skelton", the American legends series, Red meets Raymond Hitchcock, an accomplished performer, produce and writer, in Vincennes and says "He took me back [after the show], introduced me to everyone, [and] showed me the footlights. I looked through the peephole at the audience coming in and fell in love with show business." [Legends-2]

The two stories are very different but the basic premise is similar. The premise of Red meeting a great star and that star's actions led the way to his career as a comedian. As a matter of fact, Red did later help Ed Wynn get back on his feet as an entertainer after a long hiatus in show business.

Red was really never interested in school. He constantly got into trouble. When he was twelve, Doc Lewis's Patent Medicine Show came to Vincennes. Red saw the show and afterwards applied to Doc for a job as a song and dance man but ended up hustling patent medicine.

At age 10 Red ran away, that summer, to be with the Doc Lewis' Patent medicine show. His duties were to pass out the medicine bottles on cue. He was so successful at his first sales experience he ran back for a new supply and in his hast, tripped up the stairs and nose-dived off the stage into Doc Lewis' supply of patent medicine. The crowd roared. Doc Lewis was so impressed, he had Red fall off the stage to the delight of his audiences instead.

Doc Lewis had him perform other duties as well including filling the elixir bottles. Red commented about the experience: "That stuff was nothing but Epson salts, water and brown sugar, and Doc was getting a buck a bottle for it. One bottle of that junk in your stomach and you either called in the undertaker or you had a constitution that could take arsenic." [Marx, 10]

Consequently, the show never played the same town twice.

Red, according to the story about his time with the Doc Lewis, worked for four years with the Patent Medicine show in the summers and sent his entire pay check of \$10 home to his mother each week with a note "We get plenty to eat, and we sleep in the wagon." [Legends,3]

"Mom used to say I didn't run away from home - my destiny just caught up with me at an early age," Skelton said. [Tributes]

After getting a taste of show business with Doc Lewis' show, Red was hooked. He returned to school after a summer of traveling, but his spirit was not there. He was enrolled in the best

school in the city but could not get involved in his studies. Red would take off anytime there was a circus or carnival in town. Red at age 14 was nearly six feet tall and he did not want to be in a 5<sup>th</sup> grade class with smart aleck 10 year olds. He decided school was not for him and dropped out. He was determined to get a job in show business. [Marx, 12]

He worked at various odd jobs including as a shipping clerk for JC Penny. But his knowledge of geography or the lack there of, was his undoing. He was canned for shipping a package which was permanently lost to the wrong destination – Springfield, Massachusetts instead of Springfield, Illinois. [Marx, 12] I suspect he said his birth date was in 1906 so he could get the job. This may be the genesis of the age disparity.

Red's next job was with a theater company. The drama production was a play and called for Red to "deliver his lines in a dramatic fashion, but he found out he could not deliver them with a straight face. The audience kept laughing instead of crying when he spoke, so he was replaced with another actor at the end of the week." "The audience just would not cooperate; they laughed only when they weren't suppose to. So I was canned." [Legends,3]

After losing that job, Skelton moved on to the stern wheeler show boat, Cotton Blossom, owned and operated by Captain Hittner, that traveled the Ohio and Missouri Rivers, performing black face skits and songs, telling jokes, and monologues. The showboat allowed him to develop his basic skills in comedy through sight routines – slapstick and pantomime. When a joke invariably did not work, "he would fall off the stage into the orchestra pit, climbing back up with the drum draped around his neck". The audiences truly enjoyed that sight and he from that point on relied "more and more on sight comedy and less on verbal wit". Red eventually lost this job because of an amorous entanglement with the captain's daughter, Samantha, which got him literally kicked off the boat, with his clothes and luggage thrown in the river. [A-3, Marx, 15]

With only the clothes on his back, Skelton was stuck halfway between St Louis and New Orleans. His location was Natchez Mississippi, where in order to make an honest living you either grew cotton or picked it. "To make a dishonest living you could either be a bouncer in [a house of prostitution] or make moonshine." [Marx, 14] His prospects were very unfavorable for success.

As luck would have it, Red encountered a "long side-burned, dapperly dressed man, who introduced himself as Jeremiah Higgins, the manager of a "Tom show". A "Tom Show" was a repertory company of actors who toured the country playing Uncle Tom's Cabin. Higgins told

Red he had seen his performance on the Cotton Blossom and his sudden departure from the ship, and invited him to become part of the company. "He would be paid for being chased." [Marx, 15]

Red played every part in Uncle Tom's Cabin but Eliza and the bloodhounds. One day he was portraying a fleeing slave chased by the dogs. Red could not get the dogs to chase him embarrassing the troop with a disgruntled audience. In true form he concocted a solution. He placed raw liver in his pants pockets before taking off on the ice with Eliza. This time the dogs performed too well ripping Red's pants to shreds and leaving fang marks on his thighs. [Marx, 15]

After wandering around with the Uncle Tom's Cabin troop, he found himself in the same town as the Hagenbeck-Wallace Circus. He applied for a job as a clown and was hired as a walk around clown. This was the same circus his father had worked in years before. Red enjoyed the camaraderie of the clowns, who helped him with the trappings and costumes of a clown and showed him how to apply his makeup. His first task was to beat a big bass drum as the circus parade wove around Madison Missouri. He was so enthralled with the stores which sold suitcases as he passed by them in the parade, he kept turning around to look at the stores and their displayed merchandise. He unknowingly violated a cardinal rule about turning around during a parade. Any circus performer had a stiff fined slapped upon them every time they turned around in a parade. In that one day parade, Skelton had amassed such a large fine that he would have to work without pay for a year. Fellow performers took pity on him, took up a collection that helped soften the blow of not having a salary for a year. They also presented him in his dressing room with a brand new suitcase with his initials RS embossed on it to replace the shabby one he had been using. [Marx, 15-16]

As the 1929 year concluded, the stock market had crashed resulting in the great depression with many businesses folding or consolidating. Circuses were no exception. The number of circuses dwindled, leaving Barnum and Bailey and Ringling Brothers, as major players. But even they had to consolidate to survive. Hagenbeck-Wallace Circus did not survive and Skelton was forced to find other employment. He wandered around other third rate circuses, showboats, side shows and minstrel shows finally ending up in about 1930 out of tents and off showboats and into legitimate theater in Kansas City. [Marx, 20-21]

The Gaiety Theater, Red found, was seeking a replacement "third banana". Red performed an impromptu audition and was hired. This was the Gaiety Burlesque Theater. Burlesque at that time was defined as a play of the 17<sup>th</sup> to 19<sup>th</sup> centuries that parodied some contemporary

dramatic fashion or event. [Marx, 23] It was also defined as a variety show characterized by broad ribald comedy, dancing, and striptease. [theFreeDictionary.com]

According to Red, the burlesque he played, “was as clean as a whistle. It was burlesque in the literal sense of the word. We burlesqued Broadway shows.” The burlesque circuit contained Kansas City, St. Louis, Indianapolis, Buffalo, and Wilkes-Barre, Pennsylvania. Red was billed as the “Youngest Top Banana in Burlesque”. According to Arthur Marx, to finish up his act, Red usually fell into the orchestra pit and came up with a drum ring around his neck.

Red met his first wife, Edna, who was head usherette at the Panates Vaudeville Theater in Kansas City. Red who was initially asked to fill in and play a bored and sometimes inebriated heckler was later called to sub for acts that failed to show. Edna, the head usherette, was not pleased with his comic performances and asked the stage manager, her boss, to fire Red. “The manager responded: I don’t have to fire him. He’ll probably kill himself falling into the orchestra pit.” [Gehring, 48]

When Burlesque changed to include strip tease, Red left the scene. The theater in which he was performing, the Gaiety, in Kansas City was raided and finally closed. Red sought a change in venue. That venue was the Walk-a-thon or Dance Marathon. [Marx, 23]

Marathons or endurance contests in which, I quote from Arthur Marx, “young couples dragged themselves around the dance floor for days, and sometimes weeks at a time, until they collapsed one by one, much to the amusement of an audience that had about as much class and compassion as the ones who enjoyed watching the lions eating the Christians. The last couple to remain on its feet was, naturally, declared the winner of the daffy event and allowed to walk off (or more than likely be carried off) with a purse ranging anywhere from \$100 to \$500, depending on the size of the town holding the Walk-a-thon and the generosity of the promoter.” [Marx, 25]

It was lucky for Red, after the Gaiety was shutdown, that the promoter of the local Walk-a-thon was looking for a replacement clown and Red was alerted by a friend of that promoter that the job was available. [Marx, 26]

Red encountered Edna Stillwell at the Walk-a-thon. Edna was a cashier and he was the emcee. She did not think much of Red after their first encounter at the Panates Vaudeville Theater in Kansas City, but Red eventually won her over with his Walk-a-thon Comedy. Edna lived on the distant outskirts of Kansas City. Accompanying her home, Red recants it as “they embarked on

what he claims is a street car ride that went from Kansas City to the Ohio State Line. Stillwell jokingly refers to a proposal tied to those long streetcar trips. Red said to her, "Why don't we get married and save me all this travel"? They did get married in 1931 when he was 18 and she was 16. [Gehring, 31-32]

Stillwell's mother had originally objected to her daughter marrying a burlesque comedian. Edna later wrote, "Red didn't help matters much by telling her that he was going to reform and become a dope peddler." [Gehring, 55]

Edna became his business manager and writer, and sometimes served as a supporting actress. She realized as did he, that in order to survive that he would need a manager. She managed the couple's business and personal finances, negotiated contracts and obtained billings. They continued the lonely road of Walk-a-thon business from city to city. At a Walk-a-thon in Atlanta, Georgia, Red was given the opportunity to emcee a Night Musical Review "As Thousands Hear", where he not only emceed the review but also acted in their sketches. His performance caught the eye of Jim Hawkins, a "veteran of vaudeville and a minor star in half dozen New York shows such as the Ziegfeld Follies and George White's Scandals. Hawkins first suggested he get rid of the rubber cigar, used as a prop, which had worked since his burlesques days. "Use a real cigar", Hawkins, advised him. Hawkins also suggested and helped them obtain an agent. Red reciprocated years later "with putting Hawkins on the payroll when he was between acting jobs". [Marx, 40-41]

Tom Kennedy, in New York became their business agent. Tom got him his first crack at a vaudeville engagement at the Majestic Theater in Patterson, New Jersey. His performance was so well accepted that Tom procured an engagement at the Lido Theater in Montreal, Canada. His performances were widely accepted by the audiences but resented by the old timers. Red was the youngest performer. The old timers hatched a strategy to get rid of Red and replace him as emcee.

Red, to his credit, devised a scheme to shore up his position. From Arthur Marx's Book, "Each Monday Morning, before opening a new show, Red would gather all the new performers up from the States on the stage of the Lido and give them an enthusiastic welcoming speech." "It's wonderful your coming up here to Montreal." He'd say, with the utmost sincerity. "You'll knock them dead. These audiences go crazy over anyone who speaks French."

"French?" a startled vaudevillian would exclaim, his face turning ashen. "What do you mean French?"



Keeping a completely straight face, Red would reply, “Why, you give your act in French, don’t you?” These people are all French Canadians, you know. They don’t understand a word of English.

To bolster his statement Red would go out front that night and as his rivals watched uneasily from the wings, he would open the show in “flawless French. This was actually double talk flavored with Gallic intonations and a few words and phrases Red had picked up since moving to French Canada.

The audience, familiar with Skelton’s act after weeks of exposure to it, would yell with delight. But his rivals for his emceeing job, not knowing French would again turn grey with fright.

“By the time I’d get done with my monologue,” Red chuckled, “some of those fellows would be so scared they’d be speechless”. Not just speechless, but so upset that they would put on shakey performances, and Puggy Dettner [the owner] would have to fire them before their two weeks were over. Some of the more cowardly would be too frightened to open at all, and would retreat across the border, mumbling imprecations against their agents for failing to warn them.” [Marx, 52-53]

Skelton provided tremendous performances at the Lido. At the end of his 8 week performance, he and Edna were preparing to return to New York, when a man named Harry Auger, called to offer Red the job of emcee at Montreal’s Princess Theater. He was a solid hit there and after two weeks moved to the Shea Theater in Toronto. He would end up playing both cities alternately for a year. [Marx, 53]

After that year, Harry Auger told Red that he needed new material. He believed his audiences were getting tired of his act. Red was surprised and went for coffee with Edna to discuss the problem. “At the coffee shop, they noticed a man clumsily dunking donuts into a cup of coffee. It was an aha moment for them. As he watched the fumbings of that unknown but by now immortalized donut dunker, Red became so fascinated that he couldn’t take his eyes off the fellow. This in turn inspired Red to work out a hilarious pantomime involving the various kinds of donut dunkers: the sloppy dunker, the fancy dunker, the one who allows the donuts to dissolve in his coffee and disappear altogether, and finally the cowardly dunker. He’s too timid to flaunt one of Emily Post’s most hallowed “No-Nos” in public, so he waits until he thinks nobody is watching before sliding his donut into his coffee.” [Marx, 54]

It took a couple of performances to perfect that routine, which became a staple for Red. His Canadian audiences loved it. It did take a toll on Red's waistline. He gained 35 pounds after doing three weeks of his act. [Marx, 54] Red's reputation extended as far south as the Warner Brothers' Theater in Washington DC. The manager, Harry Anger had moved to DC and booked him into the theater. After a success stint there he moved to New York and the prestigious Loew's State Theater.

"We opened at Loew's State Theater in New York City. It's the one and only big vaudeville house here, and ....we have never played the big city before- we're scared too but darn happy about it." Edna Stillwell Skelton commented. [Gehring, 65]

"What happened to the sophisticated audience theory?" "All the comics were changing their material when they got to New York," explains Red. "They thought their stuff wouldn't go over on Broadway. So New Yorkers never got a look at the material that was bowling them over in the sticks and the mid west. With me they saw it. And they liked to tear the place down." [Marx, 59]

Pandro Berman saw Red on the stage at the Loews and was impressed with Red's work. He invited him to Hollywood and a movie called "Having Wonderful Time". This movie kick started Skelton's Hollywood career. He made 36 movies between 1937 and 1965.

Red's first movies with MGM include "Having a Wonderful Life" in 1938, "Flight Command" in 1940, and "The People versus Dr. Kildare" in 1941. His best known movies with MGM included "Whistling in the Dark" released in 1941. This movie catapulted Red into national prominence and made him a true star and film leading man. Red commented after all the acclaim: "I hope my head fits when I try to get back to New York through the Holland Tunnel." [Gehring, 116] The movie's lead is Wally Benton.

Wally Benton (Red Skelton) isn't a detective, but he plays one on the radio. The confusion between Benton and his crime-solving persona results in a rather perilous situation when cult leader Joseph Jones (Conrad Veidt), greedy for the inheritance of one of his flock, blackmails Benton to craft the perfect murder. Under the watchful eye of Jones' burly thug, Sylvester (Rags Ragland), the actor has to hatch a flawless plot -- or improvise his way out of his predicament. He has until 11 o'clock. [[www.moviefone.com](http://www.moviefone.com)]

"Under the review lines, 'Comic Hailed as Bright New Star, the *Hollywood Reporter*, also predicted happy days for the studio: "Obviously MGM had only one purpose.....showcase in a

modest package the comedy talents of Red Skelton. So well is this objective achieved that one look at the film should bring “radiant’ smiles to the faces of the MGM executives and all their exhibitors, ‘Whistling in the Dark’ brings to light ....a good comic trouper named Skelton who merely needs a couple of good pictures to zoom right up to the top. He’s dynamite with an Audience.” [Gehring, 112]

The second top movie was “The Fuller Brush Man” released 1948. The plot includes Red Jones a man who is unable to get a job.

Poor Red Jones gets fired from every job he tries. His fiancée gives him one last chance to make good when he becomes a Fuller Brush man. His awkward attempts at sales are further complicated when one of his customers is murdered and he becomes the prime suspect. -  
*Written by [Daniel Bubbeo, [dbubbeo@cmp.com](mailto:dbubbeo@cmp.com)]*

New York Morning Telegram critic: “The talk is that the MGM studios fondly believe they’ve discovered another Bob Hope in the personality of a lad named Red Skelton.....it would appear that this belief is not altogether unjustified.” [Gehring, 111]

### **Radio 1940-1953**

Red enjoyed dual media attention by his audiences. “Rudy Vallee, the Fleischmann Hour emcee, allowed Skelton the opportunity to break into radio. Vallee knew Skelton from *Variety* notices and he and his band frequently followed Skelton in several 1937 bookings.” [Gehring, 103]

Rudy Vallee had booked two comedians, Joe Cook, a seasoned performer, as well as Red Skelton for his show. Both hailed from Indiana, Joe from Evansville and Red from Vincennes. The two Hoosiers proceeded to kid each other about their respective hometowns. “Skelton comically called Cook’s Evansville a “suburb of Vincennes”. The end result as reported by another front page *Vincennes Sun-Commercial* article, was a radio rating bonanza. “Red made a big hit with his wise-cracks and bantering comedy.....A deluge of fan mail brought him back to the program again.” [Gehring, 74-75]

The Sun-Commercial’s front page headline: “for the return comedy bout between the two Hoosiers boldly stated: ‘Red Skelton to Pursue Feud with Joe Cook on Air Tonight.’”[Gehring, 75] “Radio feuds were big business. Jack Benny and Fred Allen, although close friends, had [just] begun their famous feud.” [Gehring, 75]

Picture oriented jokes led to a better radio audience: “A lady says to her little boy, you’re pulling that cats tail? No, I am not pulling the cat’s tail. I am holding on to it. He’s doing the pulling”. Well, you know, that’s a picture. The people can picture this. So that’s how I established all my jokes on the radio.” Just a side note- today the little boy’s statement would be called alternative facts. [Gehring, 86] The Red Skelton Show ran between 1941 to 1953 on Tuesday nights.

Another character appeared on Red’s Radio show. Junior, “The mean little kid” made his radio appearance. Sprouting “I dood it” in October 1941, and won over his audiences. Junior was a tremendous hit and his saying “I dood It” was a hallmark saying for the country. Newspaper Headlines about the War in Japan – echoed Junior’s famous line “Doolittle Dood It” when General Jimmy Doolittle bombed Japan flying B-25s from an aircraft carrier. This was the first US strike against the Japanese homeland.

Junior was much more rude and mischievous at times.... (?) “Oh I wish I had left you at home, his mom scolded. ‘Oh, no you don’t, Junior replied, because by now I coulda had 3 rooms completely wrecked.” [Gehring, 131]

Clem Kadiddlehopper was considered the best of Red’s radio characters and was based on childhood friend Carl Hopper. [Gehring,244] Clem Kadiddlehopper was a country bumpkin, slow witted and big hearted. Although never intentionally hurtful, he would often cause clownish harm and upstage high society slickers, often, to his long-suffering father’s shagrin. “When the stork brought you, Clem, I should’ve shot it on sight!” [The official Red Skelton Biography]

Other classic Radio and TV Characters you may remember include:

- Guzzler’s gin, a radio announcer
- Freddie the Freeloader, a Sad Clown
- Cauliflower McPugh, a boxer
- San Fernando Red, a shuckster
- Sherriff Deadeye
- George Appleby, henpecked husband
- Gertrude and Heathcliff, “a pair of seagulls that Skelton mocked by flapping his arms and shaping his hat into the shape of a bill”

The Red Skelton Show had a fantastic supporting cast which included such greats as Ozzie and Harriet Nelson and Wonderful Smith. [Gehring, 126] With a variety show format, Ozzie, a

national recognized orchestra leader and Harriet as a singer and actress, the show provided a variation in composition. "Ozzie occasionally surfaced in a Skelton radio sketch. Harriet was a regular. She doubled as both Clem's girl friend, Daisy June, and as Junior's mother."

Another supporting cast regular was Wonderful Smith, a black comic, who acted as Skelton's antagonist similar to Jack Benny's Rochester.

Comment by Skelton: "Movies are not my friend. Radio and Television are." In 1947 [Gehring, 191] He preferred radio and TV to movie making.

Red joined army when he was drafted in 1942, and shipped overseas to serve with an Army entertainment unit as a private in 1944. Overwork led him to a nervous breakdown in Italy and he spent three months in a military hospital recuperating and was discharged in September 1945. He once joked about his military experience, "I was the only celebrity who went in and came out a private". [Official Red Skelton page/ biography]

In 1951 after performing shows at several military bases in Europe and an audience with Pope Pious the XII, Red and his wife Georgia were flying from Rome to London, England when their aircraft developed mechanical problems in three of the four engines over the Alps. The pilot had to jettison fuel, and pure desperation ran among the 54 multinational passengers who included a number of children. The aircraft was rapidly descending. Among the passengers was a Jesuit priest, Farther Edward Carney, who told Skelton, "Ok Red, you take care of your department and I will take care of mine." While the priest was performing last rites for the passengers, Skelton went through a spectacular performance which distracted the passengers with pantomime. That pantomime readily resonated with the passengers, many of whom spoke many different languages. The plane landed safely in Lyon France. [Gehring, 226]

Newsweek reported, Skelton credited it as being "the performance of his life". [Gehring, 226] As a result of his world wide acclaim, Skelton was asked to return to England to play the London Palladium. [Legends, 21]

A 1951 Palladium Theater commentary from the London Times: "Mr. Skelton...does more than many of his fellow visitors from the American screen. His patter of course, is as smoothly sophisticated, but he has a very pretty talent for pantomime which is all his own. He can twist that large, mobile and deceptively naïve face into the semblance of quite different faces, those of two ill-matched boxers and the referee, or the face of a man deeply moved by a film while engaging in eating an ice [cream]". [Gehring, 227]

Wife Davis commented: "Red has simply won London. He's been doing three shows daily and every performance is a sell-out." [Gehring, 227] This incident endeared his audiences to him even more and provided him more world wide acclaim as he moved into the era of television.

Television was a new novelty on the block, or so the movie studios thought in the 1940s and 1950s. Radio stars were concerned about its emergence because it forced them to work. In Radio there were no lines to memorize, no sets to be constructed, and really little acting.

Television would require a change in working conditions for all involved including stars, directors, and writers. It meant longer working hours for everyone, a six day work week, and a new production every week.

"Of all the radio stars popular in those days, Red Skelton was considered to have the best chance to make it on TV, because as everyone had been saying for years, he was basically a "sight" comic and born for TV. Even his "mean little boy" characterization, though dependent on the radio listeners imagination in order to visualize a grown man as a kid, had been accepted in a visual medium such as vaudeville. So Red's future seemed assured." [Gehring, 137]

In a Long Beach Press Telegram interview, Red Skelton "noting that television is here, and I am trying to learn all I can about it, television will produce an entirely new line of talent , just as talkies revised the list of silent stars." [Gehring, 118]

In comments from the newspapers, the Internet and Facebook of the day, are noted the following: *Hollywood Reporter*, "Move over Mr. Berle, - Mr. Skelton has arrived...the new medium has found its newest—and perhaps greatest—comedy star". [Gehring, 229] *New York World Telegram* stated (1951), "[Skelton] has an India rubber face and an apparently unbruiseable body... There is a kind of joyous lunacy in Mr. Skelton's work. And for this reason I've always thought he would do better in television than most radio performers in transition." [Gehring, 229] *Variety*, "[Skelton's] a terrific bet for TV [and he] seemed completely at ease before the lenses. His material was good and he tossed in what seemed to be some ad libs in fine style." [Gehring, 229]

He was very psychic about his profession as we look later in the life of television. His television career and program ran from 1951 to 1970. In his first TV show, he introduced all his characters, "the most praised sketch involved his oldest and most Hoosier-anchored antihero, the beloved Clem Kaddiddlehoper". [Gehring, 229]

In 1952, at Emmy Time, Red Skelton was selected as Television's Best Comedian. He even beat out Lucille Ball. He said' "I don't like this. I think this should go to Lucy." Several critics were impressed: "This is where Skelton endeared himself in our hearts forever." [Gehring, 229-230]

Red had starred with Lucille Ball in the movies: "Having Wonderful Time" 1938, "Du Barry was a Lady" 1943, "Thousands Cheer" 1943, and "Ziegfield Follies" 1946.

Red's show ran for 17 years and was a hit for most of them. 1951 was a great kick off season which aired in September of that year and culminated in great recognition for his show. The 1952 season was a flop because of Red's personal life. Post 1952 involved a slow recovery process that extended through 1954.

Red's solution during those difficult years was to fire and hire new writers. Writers were the backbone of a comedian's program. Good writers were hard to find. Red had a love hate relationship with them.

During his show's run, he had almost every famous person in American on at one time or another, from actors to politicians, to singers. John Wayne, Rocky Marciano, and Boris Karloff all made appearances on his show. [Legends, 27; Gehring, 253] "Everybody we asked to be on the show accepted. That demonstrates what I have always believed: Everyone has a secret desire to play a clown." [Legends, 27]

Red's production schedule is what is the industry calls a "stop and go" method. Individual scenes were live, but there were breaks between segments. "These allowed Skelton adequate time for various comic costume changes, as well as giving him a brief respite before morphing into a different character." [Gehring, 231] "Mondays and Tuesdays represented multiple run-throughs and rehearsals, with the actual taping of the show on Tuesday night before a studio audience of two hundred for broadcast 3 weeks later." [Gehring, 288] The time slot for most of the decade [1951 to 1961] was from 8:30 pm to 9:30 pm on Tuesday evenings. [Gehring, 288]

In 1975, "Syndicated television critic Walter Hawver wrote, Sid Caesar, Carl Reiner, Howard Morris, Jackie Gleason, Art Carney, Wally Cox, Herb Shriver, all have fallen by the wayside. But Red Skelton, whose appeal seems to be eternal, will be back again with his gallery of characters." [Gehring, 260]

Red Skelton commented in 1957 “All around me comics are biting the dust. Why they are I don’t know. Neither does anyone else. I know this though. If I had any formula for the success of a comedy show, I’d gladly share the secret with the comics. There’s certainly room for lots of laughs in this old world of ours.” [Gehring, 261-262]

The 1957-58 TV season saw the rise of western programs. These include Gunsmoke, Tales of Wells Fargo, Have Gun will Travel, Wyatt Earp, and the Restless gun to mention a few. [Gehring, 261]

“Caught In Crossfire”, Red Skelton said, Cowboys have taken over, and there’s hardly a minute of air time left for us comedians. There’s gonna be a range war, if we can ever find the range.” Deadeye countered, “Shucks partner, them comics been squattin on open rangeland too long. Let ‘em declare war on us. We’ll head them off at the pass. We’ll make ‘em smile when they say that, stranger.” [Gehring, 261-262]

In a 1961 TV Guide article, Skelton was reported as saying “Before a show he is a frightened man who desperately needs comfort and clings to Mrs. Skelton (Davis). ‘It is fear of not being liked,’ I guess, Red says. The fear [is] of not being good.” [Gehring, 310]

Red Skelton’s show was cancelled in 1970 after 17 seasons. Top rated at the time, The Red Skelton Hour was consistently in the top 7 or top 10 TV shows. [Gehring, 298] The TV management thought his program would no longer resonate with a younger audience. [Gehring, 293, 297] In a move to attract a younger urban audience, CBS dropped Skelton’s show at the end of the 1969-70 Season, despite the program coming in at number 7 in the Nielson Ratings.” [Gehring, 293] A New genre of television was emerging and CBS wanted to be a part of the change.

“Skelton’s sacking was quite a shock, especially since it had largely been a decade of achievements for him, beyond the ratings.” [Gehring, 293] Cancellation of his TV series by CBS, he never let it go. [Gehring, 293]

Behind every successful man stands a strong and supportive spouse. Red had three marriages. The first was to Edna Stillwell, who he married in 1931. She was his writer and manager for many years.

She continued as manager after their divorce in 1942 until 1952. They had no children.



His second wife was Georgia Davis, who had completed a college degree in Art, and married Red in 1945. She was an actress, strong supporter, and the mother of their 2 children, Valentinia and Richard. Richard died from leukemia 1957 at age 10, which devastated his parents. [Legends, 30; Gehring, 264] Georgia later committed suicide on the anniversary of Richard's death in 1972.

His third wife, Lothian Toland, was the daughter of the acclaimed academy award winner in cinematography, Gregg Toland. Red married Lothian in 1973. [Gehring, 305] She was a former model and a quiet supporter. She visits the Red Skelton Museum in Vincennes once a year and has contributed much of Red's paintings and theater props to that museum.

Red said: "I live by this credo: Have a little laugh at life and look around you for happiness instead of sadness. Even in your darkest moment, you usually can find something to laugh about if you try hard enough." [Legends, 6] Red Skelton also once said, "All men make mistakes, but married men find out about them sooner." [Legends, 3]

One typically never thinks of Red Skelton as a dramatic actor because of his comic background. Yet, Red played dramatic roles in two productions to critical acclaim.

The first was a MGM movie, "Three Little Words". [Marx, 146-147] "...Three Little Words was an enormous success hit, both with the critics and at the box office where it opened in New York on August 10, 1950. Under Richard Thorpe's direction, Red surprised everyone – Astaire, Ruby, and even himself – with his ability as a straight actor." [Marx, 147] Ruby was the music artist Red portrayed.

This second was a Playhouse 90 TV Drama "The Big Slide", on Nov 8, 1956 where Red played Buddy McCory. The story line: When a second-rate vaudeville comic becomes a silent movie star, the conflict between his love for an actress and the demands of his career brings tragedy and heartbreak to the clown. [Playhouse 90, tv.com] Red proved his true versatility as an actor in both dramatic and comic roles.

After Red Skelton's show was cancelled, he returned to live performances, especially college campuses. He wanted to prove the TV gurus wrong. "Skelton seemed to accomplish this in 1978 when he was awarded the College Comedian of the Year." [Gehring, 311] So much for the comment by CBS that his program could not resonate with a younger audience.

Red performed at Carnegie hall in 1977. The New York Times reported, “He is as hilariously rubbery as ever, nimble legs, facile hands, plastic-putty face and expressive eyes.” [Gehring, 312]

Red Returned again to Carnegie Hall in 1980. The Reporter stated that there was a standing ovation before the concert began, followed by the most responsive of crowds: “The audience reacted with hilarity to the stories and applauded his mimicry vociferously”. [Gehring, 312]

Red enjoyed Painting, Photography, Writing books, Bonsai gardening, and raising horses. [Gehring, 278] “Of all Red’s avocational artistic outlets, the one of which he is probably the most gifted is painting.” He became involved in painting after he and Georgia moved to Palm Springs although he dabbled with painting in 1943. Red has turned out over 600 oil paintings and most are portraits of clowns. [Marx, 271] “James Bacon reported: “Skelton admits that his lucrative life as a clown has gotten into the way of a secret desire to be a writer.” [Gehring, 254] Red is also a song writer having written well over 8,000 songs.

In his private life, he was also a 33<sup>rd</sup> Degree Mason and Shriner. He was a life-long member of the Vincennes Masonic Lodge.

Red Skelton was the recipient of numerous professional awards and these include:

1952 Emmy, he took home the statuette for the Best Comedy show. He was also selected as “Television’s Best Comedian”. [Gehring, 229]

1986 Honorary Doctorate from Ball State University [Gehring, 310]

1978 College Comedian of the Year Award [Gehring, 311]

1978 Golden Globes’ Cecil B. DeMille Award for outstanding contributions to the entertainment industry [Gehring, 311]

1987 Screen Actors Guild Award for career achievements [Gehring, 311]

1989 Induction into the Television Academy’s Hall of Fame [Gehring, 311]

1989 Induction into the International Clown Hall of Fame [Gehring, 311]

1993 admission to the Comedy Hall of Fame [Gehring, 311]

Red Skelton’s health suffered after he retired in 1993. He had suffered a severe asthma attack in December 1957 which almost killed him. Those stresses were a result of work and the pain of his son Richard’s severe illness. The stresses and strains he placed on his body in performing his physical routines had also taken their toll over time. His death occurred in California on

September 17, 1997 at the Eisenhower Medical Center in Rancho Mirage California from pneumonia. The world had lost a great clown, comic and entertainer.

In an interview on television, Red was asked how he would like to be remembered - as a great clown, movie actor, or television comedian. Red mulled the question over for a minute, then chose none of the three. "I think I'd just like to be remembered as a nice guy," he replied modestly. [Marx, 313]

"I am nuts and I know it but as long as I can make them laugh they ain't gonna lock me up." [Gehring, 210]

On January 14, 1969 Red Skelton dropped his usual monologue and did a monologue on what the pledge of allegiance meant. "Following a year filled with assassinations [Martin Luther King Jr. and Robert Kennedy], public protests gone violent and the unproductive military campaign in Vietnam, Red's pledge of Allegiance struck a chord with....[viewers] about patriotism and what's right with America despite what had gone wrong previously." [Legends, 32]

### **The Pledge of Allegiance**

**I** – me, an individual; a committee of one

**Pledge** – dedicate all of my worldly goods to give without self pity

**Allegiance** –My love and my devotion

**To the Flag** – Our Standard; Old Glory; a symbol of Freedom; wherever she waves there is respect because your Loyalty has given her a dignity that shouts. Freedom is everybody's job.

**United**—That means that we all come together

**States** – Individual communities that have united into forty eight great states. Forty eight individual communities with pride and dignity and purpose. All divided with imaginary boundaries, yet united to a common purpose, and that is the love for country.

**And to the Republic** – Republic-a state in which sovereign power is invested in representatives chosen by the people to govern. And government is the people; and it's from the people to the leaders, not from the leaders to the people.

**For Which It Stands**

**One Nation** – One Nation-meaning blessed by God

**Indivisible** – Incapable of being divided

**With Liberty** – Which is freedom; the right of power to live one’s own life without threats, fear, or some sort of retaliation

**And Justice** – The principles or qualities, of dealing fairly with others

**For All** – For All -- which means boys and girls, it’s as much your country as it is mine.

And now, boys and girls, let me hear you recite the Pledge of Allegiance:

I Pledge Allegiance to the Flag of the United States of America, and to the Republic for which it stands; one nation indivisible, with liberty and justice for all.

Since I was a small boy, two states have been added to our country, and two words have been added to the Pledge of Allegiance: Under God. Wouldn’t it be a pity if someone said that is a prayer, and that it would be eliminated from schools, too?

[Legends, 32-33]

### **In Closing**

“We’re all put on earth for a purpose, and mine is to make people laugh.” Red Skelton said. [Gehring, 101] He was a man for all seasons from Medicine Shows, Burlesque, and vaudeville to movies, radio and television. He was a consummate performer in many different venues for over 70 years. He entered our homes on Tuesday and Sunday nights and made us laugh. This was the man we call Red Skelton. And now in closing, let me say for him, Good night and may God Bless.

Thank you.

## Bibliography:

- a. "American Legends : The Life of Red Skelton", Charles River Editors, ISBN 9781500406158, EPUB, 2014
- b. "Red Skelton, the Mask Behind the MASK", Wes D. Gehring, Indiana Historical Society Press, Indianapolis, 2008
- c. "Red Skelton", Arthur Marx, E.P. Dutton, New York, 1979
- d. The Famous People "Red Skelton Biography - 4083", [www.famouspeople.com](http://www.famouspeople.com)
- e. Red Skelton – September 17, 1997 Obituary – Tributes.com
- f. "Vegans recall Skelton's wit, charm, warmth", Las Vegas Sun News, September 18, 1997
- g. The Official Red Skelton Page/Biography, [www.redskelton.com](http://www.redskelton.com)
- h. [www.independent.co.uk/news/obituaries/obituary-red-skelton-1239921.html](http://www.independent.co.uk/news/obituaries/obituary-red-skelton-1239921.html)
- i. Red Skelton Biography, THEFAMOUSPEOPLE, [www.thefamouspeople.com](http://www.thefamouspeople.com)
- j. Red Skelton, Good Night and God Bless – America's Clown Prince, [www.RedSkelton.info](http://www.RedSkelton.info)