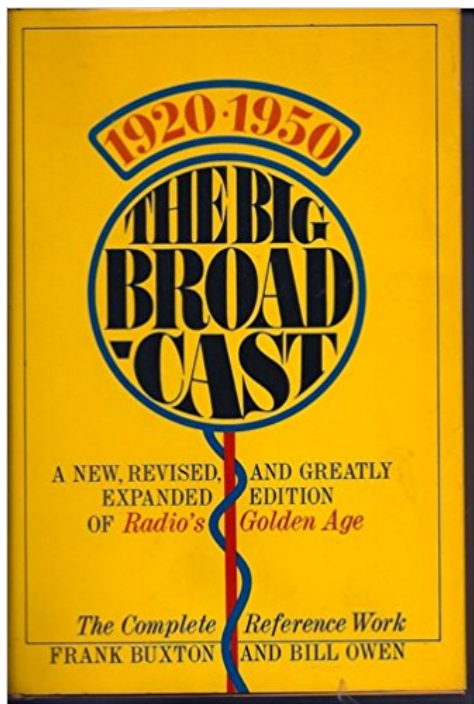


A PRIMER FOR RESEARCHING OLD-TIME RADIO

by Martin Grams, Jr.

A little more than seven years ago I wrote a five-part article about researching old-time radio. It focused on where to find archival materials, tools of the trade, resources to use, and pitfalls to avoid. As computer and communications technology evolved, so have the methods of research, and a revision to those original articles is in order. This time I've condensed the information into this one article, a primer for anyone who desires to research old-time radio.

Everyone in the hobby benefits from preservation efforts. Whether it is renewing our membership in an old-time radio club, donating money for the purchase of a 16-inch electrical transcription disc, or participating in online forums or social media, we all can do our part. A single act of neglect – being unwilling to contribute time and/or money to a preservation project – will destroy the records of who and what we are as a hobby and as a means of keeping interest in the radio era alive.



It is easy to find an excuse to not financially contribute, and sit back and reap the rewards that others are willing to fund. Sometimes it's not money that's needed, but one's time. One essential aspect of preservation is research. It is the scanning of radio scripts at an archive that adds perspective to the recordings we have. A recent effort provided the broadcast dates for the four *Popeye the Sailor* radio broadcasts that commonly circulate among collectors. It was research that helped assign correct episode numbers for *Night Beat*. Perhaps the most amusing aspect of radio research is the constant evolution of facts and figures – new discoveries are found practically every day, and more are waiting to be discovered.

The evolution of radio research is interesting. The most basic one is general old-time radio reference books, such as Buxton and Owen's *The Big Broadcast*, which paved the way to more detailed works. During the 1960s and 1970s, such tomes were a fond look back with relaxing prose and descriptive contents.

Those books attempted to make the Golden Age of Radio come alive again, with fact-filled compendium of memory-jogging nostalgia. While those authors had the advantage of interviewing radio personalities, they oftentimes had to rely on faded memories and assorted newspaper clippings – neither of which proved reliable. They were the best that could be had at that time, but ultimately created many myths and mistakes that new research has since disproven. Still, many of their mistakes persist in current publications.

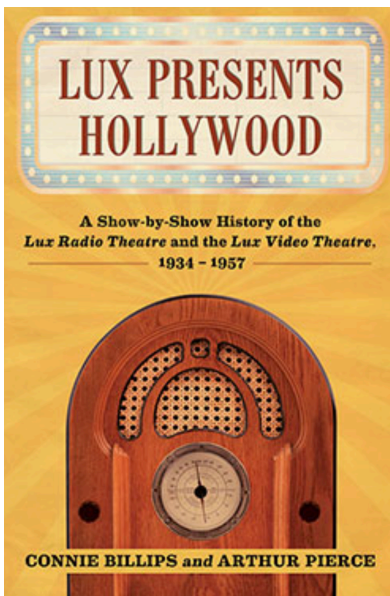
In the 1980s and 1990s, old-time radio programs became a lucrative business for some vendors who sought transcriptions discs from vast treasure troves and labored over professional audio equipment to extract the vintage radio broadcasts onto magnetic tape. It was these same vendors who extracted metadata from the disc labels to assemble broadcast logs. Many of these broadcast logs were printed and distributed for collectors, others in the forms of catalogs. This was the second phase of the evolution. While providing more hardcore facts, like the authors before them, they had limited access to archival materials. For many fans and collectors of this era, dealer catalogs were the only way they learned about programs and personalities. The dealers found that the more information they provided, the better the sales of their recordings.

Below is a set of definitions that are required knowledge in going forward with researching old-time radio.

Metadata – A set of data that describes and gives information about other data. In other words, an audio recording on a CD is digital data (or simply “data”) and metadata would be the name of the program, episode number, broadcast date, and so on. This term became more popular as “tags” on digital audio files such as mp3 recordings.

Broadcast Log – Similar to a captain’s log on a sailing vessel, a brief list of metadata which usually consists of an episode number, script title, broadcast date and (sometimes) cast. Usually one line of metadata per broadcast entry. Collectors find these useful to determine which episodes they need in their collections.

Episode Guide – Similar to a broadcast log but with much more information including production credits (writer, director, producer, sound man), plot summaries, trade reviews, trivia, and so on. These can be very helpful for those programs that did not have announced show titles, and the plots fill in the gaps where recordings are not known to exist. (And when “lost” recordings are found, can help substantiate the validity of the claim, along with broadcast date.)



In 1995, Connie Billips and Art Pierce wrote what may be considered the first true reference guide focused on any single old-time radio program: *The Lux Radio Theatre*. Published by McFarland Publishing, its 700 plus pages included an extensive history of the program and an episode guide. Only one episode is known to exist from the first two years of the series, so the authors consulted radio scripts at a University archive to assemble plot summaries, cast and other information that would otherwise not be available to the general public. This can be considered the beginning of the third phase in the evolution of scholarly radio research. Since recordings did not exist, the authors accomplished the next best thing by preserving those “lost” shows.

McFarland Publishing, with mass distribution to college and university libraries, was for years the only man on the street willing to distribute books about old-time radio. Then, publisher Ben Ohmart came along. With his Bear Manor Media publishing company, an expansion of radio reference guides (at more affordable prices compared McFarland’s library offerings) created a decade-long boost of reference guides for the hobby.

The Internet, blogs, websites and even print-on-demand is now a viable option for researchers who want to publish their findings. (Another option are the old-time radio club newsletters that also have large circulation numbers.)

Without mass distribution, no preservation project in written form is considered practical. What is the point in digging through archives, and documenting the history of a radio program, only to later learn the print run of the book was less than 50? The larger the circulation, the larger the preservation effort accomplished. This is the main reason why selecting the proper platform (i.e. publishing option) is essential. This is why non-researchers who maintain collective metadata on websites, gleaned from published reference guides, feel they are providing a service to the community/hobby. They are, however, mistaken. In reality, their efforts cause more damage to the hobby. By extracting and reprinting material from published reference guides, they diminish the demand and value of those books, handicapping sales and limiting potential distribution. Weigh the options... is posting a list of script titles and broadcast dates on a website more beneficial to the hobby than endorsing a 400-page book documenting the entire history of that program?

The Definition of Research

Research – The systematic investigation into and study of materials and sources in order to establish facts and reach conclusions.

Before we begin with the mechanical aspect of research, we must first evaluate and acknowledge the definition of “research.” Far too many people rely on prior published works, and Internet websites, as a source of reference. This is known as secondary research because it does not refer to primary sources such as production materials (i.e. inter-office memos, radio scripts). Relying solely on secondary research can be a big mistake. The majority of the myths and mistakes about old-time radio are a direct result of this oversight. Respected historians, who stay in tune with recent archival discoveries, often joke that “Fifteen books can be wrong... and 100 websites are definitely wrong.” This refers to the fact that 14 authors reprinted the same information found in other books, and when 100 websites cite the same fact, you can be certain 100 people never went to an archive – they simply consulted and reprinted what they read on another website.

Here’s an example. You bought a CD containing two radio episodes of *Yours Truly, Johnny Dollar*, with titles and broadcast dates. Most people would assume that the metadata is fairly accurate. Such information is used by collectors to organize their collections and avoid unnecessary duplication. In the early years of collecting, this was of tremendous value. Many of those titles and broadcast dates, however, were inaccurate. So how do you know the broadcast date and title printed on the CD is accurate? What was their source? I know of many instances where researchers who go directly to the source (archives, radio scripts, etc.) discover that extant recordings have been mis-labeled and incorrectly identified.



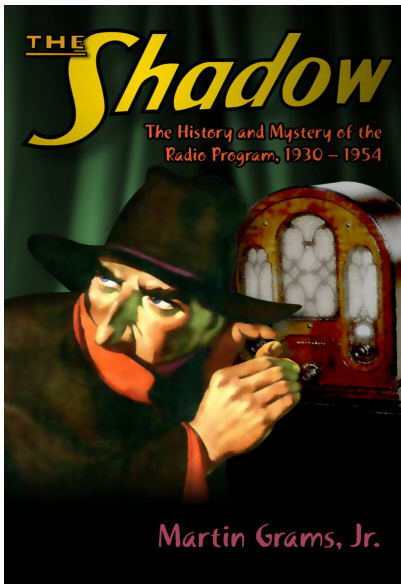
There is a difference between a script title and descriptive title (a.k.a. “collector titles”). Many programs, like *The Aldrich Family*, did not have announced titles, and re-used plotlines constantly. That meant some collectors titled shows with nebulous titles such as “Henry has Girlfriend Problems” or “Henry has Problems at School.” Now that mass treasure troves of recordings are available to collectors, over-saturation has created more interest in catalog accuracy. OTR’s die-hard collectors want some assurance that the script title and broadcast date are accurate... and will not hesitate to make the necessary adjustments, including the documentation of previously inaccurate titles, to create a research trail that helps future collectors.

The review of prior published reference guides and/or websites (including blogs and Wikipedia) is secondary research, and primary research is the most important kind of research that can be done. (Whenever I use the phrase “research,” I am referring to doing the legwork that primary research requires. This includes consulting archival materials, and tracking down family relatives of principal participants from vintage radio broadcasts.) Anyone who consults a book, magazine or newspaper article and/or Wikipedia as their only source for reference is opening themselves to errors, and they can be misled by mistakes or limitations of prior research efforts. If material gathered from these sources are compiled for use in a publication, this is considered “cut-and-paste.” If information from prior reference works is restructured with different words and phrases, this is still cut-and-paste, or what I refer to as “grammatical cosmetics.” It is absolutely necessary that primary research consists of first-hand sources (such as archival materials) and material not found anywhere else. Which now leads us to “structure.” I know of no sincere researcher, historian or professor with credibility who consults Wikipedia as a reference.

Before you publish your findings, decide on the approach. Suppose you are researching the history of a radio soap opera and discover the creator of the program, during their personal down time, owned and operated a nudist camp for adults. Do you include this information in your write-up? Some would say it is better to praise than expose (pun intended). But more important are two things to consider.

(a) Is the information about the nudist camp the true focus of your book? If the title of your book is “The History of *John’s Other Wife*: A Radio Program, 1932-1941,” what part of that speaks nudist camp?

(b) Will the details about the nudist camp overshadow the rest of the subject matter in your book? If you were to ask someone who read your book what they learned about the soap opera and their response will more than likely focus on the nudist camp, did you accomplish your agenda?



To cite a perfect analogy: A few years ago I wrote a book about radio’s *The Shadow* and a critic harshly listed a number of concerns he had, namely factoids he felt I should have included in my book. Among them was the failure to mention that Orson Welles was an amateur magician. My defense? Orson Welles was the star of the radio program but his magical stage act had nothing to do with *The Shadow* radio program. The title of the book was *The Shadow: The History and Mystery of the Radio Program, 1930 – 1954*. The fact that Orson Welles was a magician should be reserved for his biographies. If the book was about his appearance on *Suspense* where he played “The Marvelous Barrastro,” a carnival magician and hypnotist, it would have been appropriate. Stay focused and know the structure of your book. Any extraneous details can be saved for another book or used in standalone articles.

With understanding of what “research” and “structure” are in relation to old-time radio reference guides, you are ready to move on to some of the tools and tricks that researchers use.

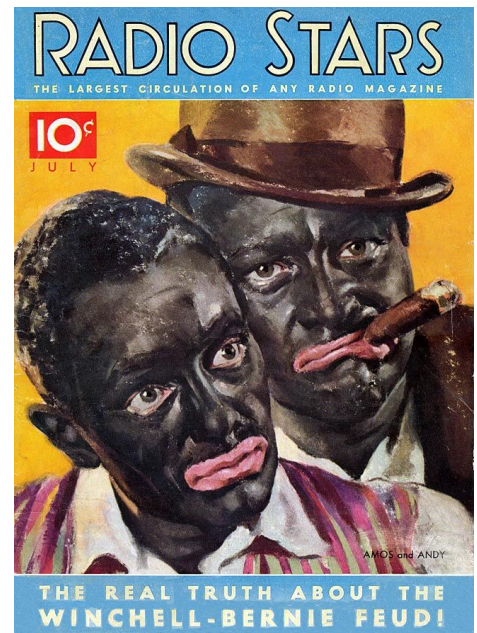
Tools

The most valuable tool you will need is a computer. Laptops are the most flexible, and today’s versions are just as powerful as desktops used to be, and often have features that are great for researchers. A laptop’s portability allows you to work on your project while you are in your hotel room, at the airport, and during down time on your research trip. Nothing feels better than knowing before you get home that you already have a fraction of the material you unearthed, assembled in a computer file, and also backed up to a cloud account like Dropbox. Some libraries will allow you to hook up a scanner to your laptop and scan photos for free – thus saving you scanning fees that the library would have charged for the service. This latter service could not be accomplished with a desktop.

The cost of a scanner has dropped dramatically over the years. If a scanner is too bulky to carry along on a trip, especially if you have to fly on an airplane, there are options. On separate occasions I flew out to an archive in the Midwest, purchased a scanner at a local Best Buy for less than \$70, installed the software into my laptop, used the scanner at the archive, and then gave the scanner away to someone before returning to the airport. Considering I had the advantage of scanning more than 400 photographs that weekend, the cost came down to less than 20 cents per photo. The library would have charged a photo fee of \$35 per photograph, had they scanned the glossies themselves. Scanners are also very good for documents, saving you copying costs. Remember that archival documents can also serve as illustrations in your write-up, supporting quotes and facts that may be questioned by skeptics.

Backup your files. With cloud devices that automatically back up your files routinely, there is no excuse not to. Make backups of backups, and rename each file with the date you worked on it and the name of the original source.

The second most valuable tool is a smartphone, which has become the most common kind of cell phone available. The iPhone is a great example. You can save hundreds of dollars in copy fees by using the camera on your phone to take pictures of documents you plan to review later. With but few exceptions, this should not be used for photographs unless you have no choice. The camera phone should be used for text documents such as letters, inter-office memos, newspaper clippings, contracts and other documents that you want to consult at a later date. For products like the iPhone, you automatically can back up to iCloud to save your work.



I remember a friend writing down material on a notepad at a library in the Midwest, copying information in a manila folder pulled from storage. In the time it took him to copy that material, I was able to copy the contents of 16 or 17 files using my smart phone. On one research trip alone the camera on your smart phone will save you so much money (versus feeding dollar bills at the copy machine) that the cost of your phone will be paid off within hours. (Most carrier plans today will give you a free smart phone.)

Budgeting Your Project

If you feel confident that you have plenty of time to accomplish your task, copy everything. Remember, in most cases your time is limited at archives so spend more time copying material. In the long run, it is cheaper to copy everything and review the materials at a later date when it is more convenient. You never know what you might discover in documents you thought were of little consequence. If copying 6,000 sheets of paper in two days at an archive that required expense to travel, giving you the luxury of careful review of the documents over a leisurely period of months for convenience, why not? Rule of thumb: "Copy first, review later."



Where I live, they do not plow the roads when it snows. Last month I traveled to an archive and digitally copied over 900 radio scripts. I will spend the winter months relaxing in my recliner, hot cup of tea next to me, cat on lap, reading all of those scripts and entering data into my laptop. It can snow blizzard-like conditions for all I care.

Sources

As I mentioned earlier, avoid using websites as reference. But do not hesitate to use the Internet as a *tool* for reference. The information on Wikipedia may not be accurate (a six-year-old can revise anything on a Wikipedia page) but external links at the bottom of many Wikipedia pages could point you to archives at University Libraries, official websites owned by producers and scriptwriters, and possible contact leads for networking. Good researchers know that the real research “gold” can often be found in the footnotes and the bibliographies of published books that can lead you to the best primary sources and the locations of research materials.

1. **Libraries** – These include college, university and public libraries, municipal buildings, and historical societies. Many libraries have finding aids which are detailed to provide you with a list of what is contained in any given collection, broken down in detail by box and folder. Some maintain their finding aids offline so contacting the library by phone or e-mail can give you an advantage most browsing the Internet would overlook.

Before you travel to an archive, contact a librarian via e-mail or phone. The staff can have the materials you requested ready for you when you arrive. All libraries operate differently. Depending on the library, some collections are stored offsite and require advance notice so they can be retrieved and made available for you. (One library requires a minimum of three weeks advance because all of their archival materials are stored in a facility in another state.) The librarians may ask about the purpose of your research, so be sure you have a good description of what you are doing and write it down. Research librarians can help most when your research objectives are clear and well-defined.

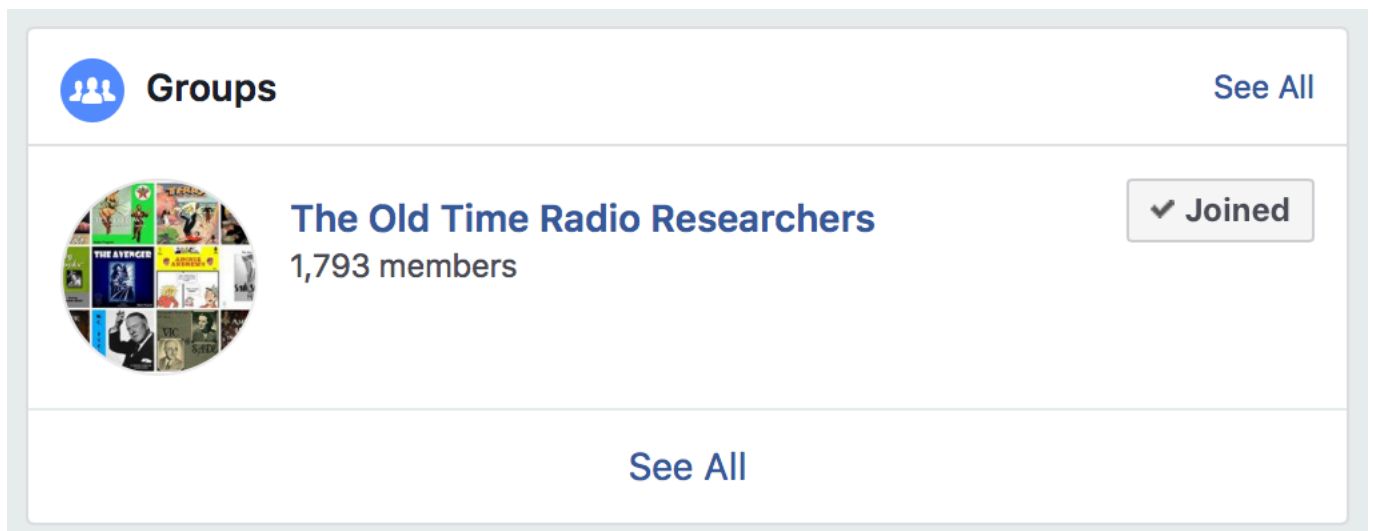
Ask where to park. You might save yourself a lot of walking, and parking fees. Ask what hotels and motels are within walking distance. Find out what their copy policy is. Ten cents or 25 cents per page? Ask if you can use your camera phone provided the sound and the flash is turned off (some archive collections have found that flash photography can hasten the deterioration of the documents they are in charge of preserving). Verify the hours of operation. I almost wasted a 16-hour drive (eight hours each direction), gas, tolls and the cost of a motel room driving to a university library on impulse. When I called to verify materials could be pulled in advance, I was told the library was closed for the next two months due to renovations. Nowhere on the website did it indicate news of their renovation plans.



2. **Family Relatives** – The second biggest advantage to research is tracking down and contacting the son, daughter or family relative of a radio personality. Not only can you receive information never before published (such as photographs, first-hand accounts passed on by relatives, etc.) but access to archival materials. Some of the best biographies ever published had the blessing and cooperation of the family, with rare photographs and content never published in other books. Be aware that in many cases there is only one family member who is regarded as the “keeper of the flame” so your initial contact may require your request to be forwarded to someone else. Also be aware that many family relatives know of their kin’s accomplishments, but are not well versed in the details. “Yeah, I know pop did something for a radio program in the 1940s,” is a phrase I have heard often. Also take note that at this late date you may be dealing with a grandson or a granddaughter, not the son or daughter.

Tracking down a family relative is relatively easy. Find the obituary of the radio personality (oftentimes found in *Hollywood Reporter*, *Variety* and/or the celebrity’s local hometown newspaper) and observe the closing lines: “survived by son and daughter...” These names, and a little persistence with whitepages.com, can provide you with contacts. Be prepared to mail multiple copies of the same letter in the event you are uncertain which search results are accurate. I once wrote 20 letters to men with the same name, each residing in different areas of the country, figuring 19 of them would toss the letter in the garbage. Yes, one of them generated a positive phone call.

Of recent, a new tool for tracking down someone is Facebook. While not everyone is on Facebook, I found the daughter of a radio scribe in less than 60 seconds. We communicated and two months later I was in her barn looking over her father’s papers and photographs that gathered dust in a filing cabinet. (Facebook offers a number of old-time radio groups. The best is The Old Time Radio Researchers page.)



Small note of importance: There have been instances in the past where family relatives were approached by multiple people claiming to be a historian, working on a magazine article or book about their father. In one instance the daughter began shutting people away because none of the prior historians ever fulfilled their promise. Do not – I repeat – do not contact a family relative with the promise of writing a book or documenting their father or mother’s legacy without sincere assurance. You will only create a sense of deception and distrust that alienates – this causes more harm than you could imagine. Be sure to share details of your prior research to demonstrate your commitment and interest. Some families do not have recordings of their family member, and often do not have pictures or other items. The reciprocal nature of a relationship can help considerably.

3. **Recordings** – The historical narrative contained within recordings of old-time radio programs can sometimes be misleading. I can cite a number of examples where the announcer credited actors who were not in the actual broadcast. Just because a collector provides you with recordings, each containing a title and broadcast date, does not mean the information is accurate. Remember that syndicated programs never had official broadcast dates.
4. **Radio Scripts** – Consulting radio scripts often resolves most of the problems described above. The correct spelling of fictional characters, proper spelling of script titles and other information can be gleaned from scripts. Keep in mind that cast listed on the front page of a radio script is not always accurate. Those radio scripts were typed up days before the broadcast and numerous examples have been cited in the past to disprove the accuracy of the information contained on the front page of the script. There was more than one type of script. The writers would submit scripts and then they would be retyped as information from the director and producer would be added, such as the planned casting for the program. Actors would have their own copies and mark them up for their performance. Directors would note cast changes and other aspects of production. The most illuminating script is the final, marked-up production copy, with all of its notes, and crossed-out items and other shorthand. Make sure to clarify the scripts you have access to are “first draft” vs. “revised” vs. “Approved for Broadcast” vs. “As Broadcast.”

jf

"ARCHIE ANDREWS" (REVISED)
EPISODE #428
"HORSEBACK RIDING"
BY
CARL JAMPFEL
CAST
ARCHIE BOB HASTINGS
JUGHEAD HARLAN STONE
MARY ALICE YOURMAN
DAD ARTHUR KOHL
VERONICA JANE WEBB
BETTY ROSEMARY RICE
MAN (DBL. DR. HIGGINS). ROBERT DRYDEN
DIRECTOR . . . KEN MacGREGOR
ANNOUNCER . . . DICK DUDLEY ORGANIST . . . JOHNNY WINTERS
ENGINEER . . . HAL RITCHIE SOUND . . . CHET HILL
SATURDAY, SEPTEMBER 26, 1953
10:00 - 10:30 AM WNBC & NETWORK
NOTICE:
This property is duly protected by copyright and may not be used in any manner without the authority of the owner thereof.
It is authorized for broadcast over National Broadcasting Company, Inc. facilities only on the date first indicated herein.

During the 1980s, vendors and collectors oftentimes created descriptive titles for programs that remained anonymous without an announcer providing a title over the air. Today, vendors are aware that programs such as *Boston Blackie* and *The Phil Harris and Alice Faye Show* never had script titles. But the programs are still marketed with descriptive titles. According to one source, commercially licensed products require a descriptive collector title because customers and collectors have come to expect that.

In the example shown on the left, the front script cover for episode number 428 of *Archie Andrews*, broadcast September 26, 1953, was titled "Horseback Riding." This was the official script title. Many websites that feature broadcast logs for *Archie Andrews*, among other radio programs such as *The Man Called X* and *The Aldrich Family*, have never listed official script titles.

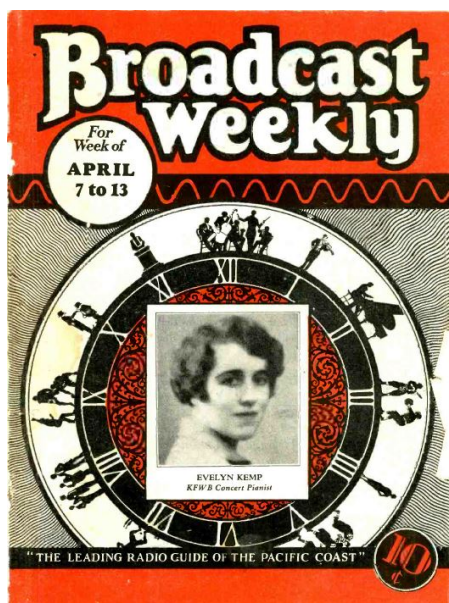
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5. **Newspapers and Magazines** – In many cases the information contained in newspaper and magazines were provided in advance by the advertising agencies, networks and sponsors. Many were fluff pieces, a basis of truth stretched into fantasy to intrigue the reader, and many times proven inaccurate. *The New York Times*, for example, printed an entire week's radio schedule in advance on Sunday. This means programs that aired on Saturday, printed in the prior Sunday paper, was provided at least a week before broadcast. Schedules changed frequently, as did choices of production.

Titles, celebrity guests and brief plot descriptions in newspapers originate from studio press releases. These were typed up days before broadcast, supplied to newspapers in advance. A collector in Canada once created a broadcast log based on the information contained within the *New York Times*, for the radio program *Suspense*. One out of every four entries, statistically, contained the wrong script title or celebrity guest. That meant 25% of the information contained in a major newspaper, for a popular high-rated prime-time network program, was inaccurate by the time the show was aired.

When I did research on *Have Gun – Will Travel*, I discovered at least three episodes in which the announcer credited actors who never appeared on the show, radio scripts citing actors in the cast who were ultimately replaced during rehearsals, and newspapers mis-spelled script titles for numerous broadcasts. It seems all three sources – newspapers, radio scripts and extant recordings – had errors.

And... if it was not for the time lag between the information sent to the newspapers and the actual broadcast, we would not know that the original title for *Suspense's* "Sorry, Wrong Number" was "She Heard Death Speaking." Many times these errors in newspapers can add to show history. In the radio era, publishing was a very complicated process that required much time, unlike today, when this kind of information can be updated as it happens.



While the adage "Something is better than nothing" can be applied here, be extremely leery over so-called historians who claim newspapers are the final word and/or rely heavily on newspapers as their primary source of information. At a recent conference with archivists and historians, one person attempting to assemble metadata for radio programs on a website confessed he was grabbing information from anywhere, regardless of the validity of the source. Quoting him: "I would rather see 100 people have wrong information than 100 people with no information." This makes every historian cringe with fear.

If you find any information in newspapers and magazines, make sure to triple check the facts. Remember the phrase often repeated by historians: "Fifteen books can be wrong and 100 websites are definitely wrong." The academic sense in this statement is the difference between research and reprinting.

Some of the most value trade papers include *Variety*, *Broadcasting*, *Radio Daily*, and *Advertising Age*. Also seek out journals for a specific sponsor's product (e.g. coffee, coal, etc.) and many sponsors had their own in-house newsletter for employees and factory authorized dealerships. Many of these house publications provide information not found anywhere else.

6. **Audio Interviews** – Beginning in the mid-seventies, many radio personalities consented to interviews on local radio stations. The recorded dialogue exchanged between the interviewer is the same as a written record. Quote accurately, but double-check the facts before printing them. It has been proven time and time again that memories fade over the years and an actress recalling 1942 as the year she was hired for the lead in a soap opera may be off by a couple years.
7. **eBay** – Photographs, scrapbooks, collectibles and historical archival documents can be found on eBay every day. Since most people will acknowledge they spend more time researching than they do typing their articles, revisiting this site periodically for new information can be beneficial. There are subjects I have been researching for more than a decade and at least once or twice a month I right-click and save a scan of an archival document that adds to the materials constantly stockpiled. You do not have to purchase archival documents if the information is provided in the photograph.

For my up-coming book about Tallulah Bankhead and *The Big Show*, I found an original 14-page salary contract signed by the actress for the NBC radio program, describing in detail the terms of her employment. The only photo the seller provided on eBay was the final page to verify the contract was an original, signed by Bankhead and NBC v.p. Charles "Bud" Barry. I bought the contract to scan into pdf format for inclusion in the back of my book as a cool addition to the preservation of the radio program. God bless eBay.



8. **ProQuest** – There are many newspaper archives available on the internet, some requiring a paid subscription. Your local public library may offer ProQuest, one of the leading digital archives available to historians and scholars, for free. In some cases, you need only have a membership to your local library to access ProQuest on your computer at home. There are various packages for ProQuest so you may find some are better than others. Take advantage of your tax dollars and visit your local public library. Find a reference librarian who can assist you with providing you all of the resources available besides ProQuest, especially newspaper and business archives. (The best ProQuest package contains all four major newspapers – the *Chicago Tribune*, the *Washington Post*, the *Los Angeles Times* and the *New York Times* – not just two of the four.)

Additional Sources

www.worldcat.org

www.archivegrid.com

www.americanradiohistory.com

www.mediahistoryproject.org

Common Mistakes

Below is a list of common mistakes I see almost routinely in magazine articles and books.

- (a) **The exact name of the program.** *The Jack Benny Program* or *The Lucky Strike Program*? Remember that many sponsors wanted the name of their product featured in the title of the program; the spotlight celebrity was oftentimes the subtitle in the announcer's opening delivery. Also make note that some radio programs changed names during the course of their broadcast history. Is *Gang Busters* one word or two? Is *Night Beat* one word or two? *Broadway Is My Beat* or *Broadway's My Beat*? When in doubt, consult illustrated newspaper advertisements and/or the radio scripts. If the spelling of a radio program differs between the two, go with the radio scripts.
- (b) **Product versus sponsor.** Sometimes I get a funny look from someone when I say that Jell-O was never a radio sponsor of Jack Benny. General Foods was the sponsor. Jell-O was the product. A product, an article or substance manufactured or refined for resale, cannot physically sponsor a program. Kudos to the advertising agencies that wanted radio listeners to associate the product with the program, but as a historian you do not want to fall for that "trap."



- (c) **Sponsor versus Advertising Agency.** Many writers make the mistake of interchanging these two. Whenever I read, "The sponsor cancelled the program after 13 weeks," I cringe. The advertising agency made that decision on behalf of the sponsor. The advertising agency was responsible for leasing airtime and facilities from the network, and the producer/director was employed by the agency. The sponsor merely agreed under contract to pay the financial debt at the end of every pay period (usually once a month). The sponsors rarely got involved with the production aspect of a radio program so do not "assume" who was the decision-maker for any policy involving a radio program.

If you dig deep enough, you will find inter-office memos exchanged between multiple parties that you can quote and clarify who made the decision that altered the course of radio history.

These top three mistakes are so common that, when I notice them in the opening paragraph of a magazine article, I tend to skim through the rest of the article with the belief that the writer knew nothing about old-time radio beyond the enjoyment of listening to extant recordings.

- (d) **Star versus co-star.** This one is obvious. Listen to the announcer when they open the broadcast and determine who gets top billing and who shares co-star billing.

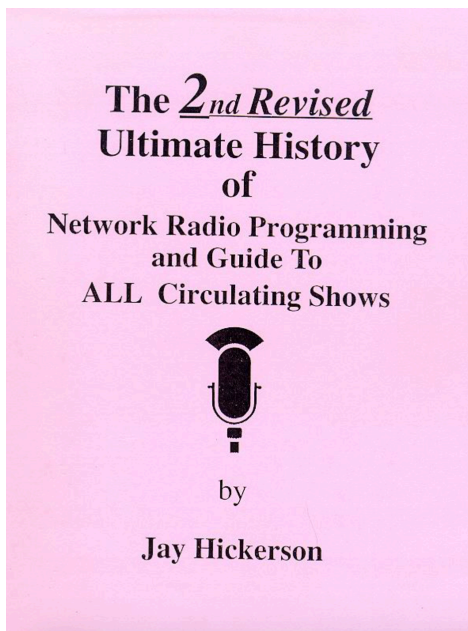
- (e) **Do not assume a radio program was cancelled just because the series stopped broadcasting.** Most radio programs were contracted under 13-week increments (13 x 4 = 52 weeks) and most radio programs were simply never renewed. "Cancelled" is something different altogether and I find that word used too often when it should have been avoided.
- (f) **Avoid typing plot summaries if your write-up is not an episode guide.** Nothing can be more tedious than reading a magazine article that is padded with plot summaries that extend beyond a single sentence, especially if the summary derives from extant recordings.
- (g) **Incorrect dates of death.** Too many people misread the obituaries in newspapers of radio personalities and I would estimate at least one-third of the dates historians provide are incorrect. I could provide a four-page article explaining how these errors occur but a simple way of avoiding this oversight is to find the grave and go by the dates etched in granite. There are plenty of websites such as findagrave.com that can verify the exact date of death. Yes, there are reference guides that list birthdates and death dates but use them as the starting point and do the legwork. I estimate 50 percent of the death dates in printed reference guides (and what can be found on Wikipedia) are inaccurate. Also remember that the cause of death is not always stated accurately in newspaper obituaries. In many cases the newspaper reports of one health issue rather than the "complications" of multiple issues.
- (h) **With websites such as ancestry.com, track down the exact birthdate of a radio personality.** It was not uncommon during the 1920s and 1930s for people of varied nationalities to Americanize their names. Do the legwork and you might discover their original birth name before it was changed.
- (i) **Beware of watermarks.** A number of individuals have, in the past, altered photographs and vintage print advertisements, claiming such alterations were "restorations." One in particular has altered hundreds (if not thousands) of vintage newspaper advertisements for radio programs on their website. This includes eliminating text and replacing it with modern-day font or adding a splash of color. If you pluck photographs and vintage print ads from Google images, be aware that you may be reprinting "altered" photo images. Do you really want to mar the good image of your magazine article or book by reprinting "altered" photos? Your task is to *preserve* old-time radio. If you travel to archives to do the legwork, you will find plenty of vintage print ads and photographs to illustrate your piece without fear of falling into this trap and more importantly, illustrate your piece with photos not available anywhere else. The biggest bragging point from scholars when describing their findings are photos never before published or seen in decades. This has become a major problem in the past few years and expected to get worse.

Only after you are done composing your essay and ready to submit to the publishers (or editor of a magazine) can you then pull reference guides off the shelf for comparison. In most cases you will discover a number of errors in printed reference guides versus what you are reporting because you went directly to the source. And in most cases, you can easily determine where their mistakes originated. A printed reference guide can provide you with a starting point, but never take anything in print as the gospel and always keep an open mind. Only after you are done can you add a footnote to any trivial point that contradicts what you are reporting, mentioning the source of your findings. Never mention those reference books by name. A perfect example from one of my books can be found below.

* A few reference guides claim the title of the program switched from *Detective Story Hour* to *Detective Story Program* after the first two broadcasts. This, however, is inaccurate. The source of this information originated from the *New York Times*, which oftentimes failed to report the correct or full title among the radio listings. The correct title was *Detective Story Magazine Hour*, as reported throughout in this book, and never changed during the 52 weeks it was on the air. Adding the word "magazine" would have constituted sponsorship and the newspaper wanted to sell ad space, not give it away.

The above is a perfect example of using footnotes to clarify accuracy of information.

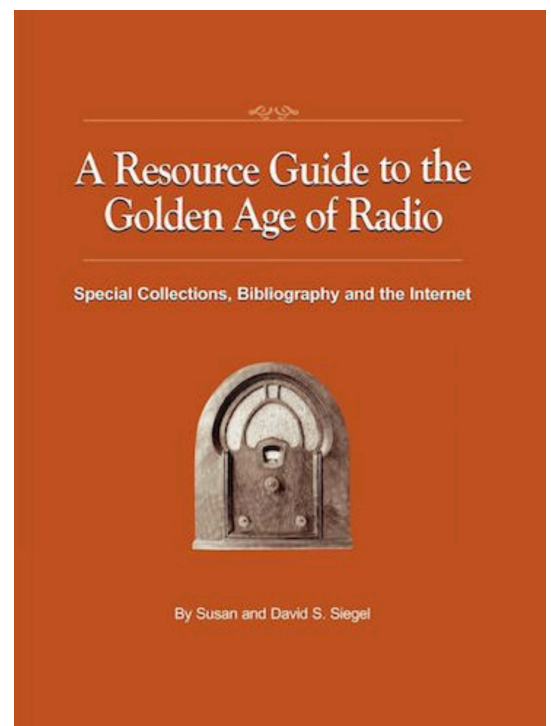
I know of a website where a so-called researcher devotes column inches on their website bad-mouthing the efforts of other researchers. He does this possibly to enhance his image as a better researcher than his peers... or so he thinks. This particular individual has lost out receiving awards – two separate awards on two separate occasions – because of this practice. Simply acknowledging “prior published reference guides” rather than calling an author out by name accomplishes the same task without branding bad image to your piece. It must also be remembered that much of the research done about old-time radio is on a voluntary basis and not by paid researchers. The more people research, the better their skills become. Research done 30 and 40 years ago did not have the advantage of the resources available today. Today’s research builds on the research efforts of the past, adding to it, and adding new perspectives from a new vantage point. It is better to teach research methods and encourage more research than belittle others.



Reference Guides

I know of no serious researcher/historian of old-time radio who does not have multiple bookshelves of reference guides devoted to the subject – from encyclopedias to biographies of radio personalities. Which books will be consulted more will be dependent on the project you are working on. The most valuable among them and the one I myself turn to more often than any other is Jay Hickerson’s *Ultimate History of Network Radio Programming and Guide to All Circulating Shows*. Every year Jay issues a supplement for his book and every four years he combines those supplements – and new information – to publish an expanded edition. So often have I turned to his book that, to avoid wear and tear, I had Jay’s book converted from spiral-bound to hardbound. This valuable reference guide is an excellent starting point when researching old-time radio and is not available through usual channels. You can purchase a copy from Jay directly at jayhick@aol.com or write to him at 27436 Desert Rose Ct., Leesburg, FL 34748.

Another book worthy of having within an arm’s reach is *A Resource Guide to the Golden Age of Radio: Special Collections, Bibliography, and the Internet* (2006, Book Hunter Press) by Susan Siegel and David S. Siegel. This book provides you with a comprehensive list of archives across the country and vast holdings of old-time radio materials. Seeking radio scripts for *Terry and the Pirates*? This book will no doubt tell you where they are housed and who to contact. Additional volumes will depend on the type of research you intend to pursue. My personal library of reference books include a variety of resources. Someone once asked me why I had a copy of Buxton and Owen’s *The Big Broadcast* (both editions), and I explained it was merely to consult when tracing back the origins of mistakes that were repeated in other books. John Dunning’s *On the Air: The Encyclopedia of Old-Time Radio* (1999, Oxford Press) is essential as a starting point, like all printed reference guides. Dig deep enough in the archives, and you will find facts in Dunning’s book, among others, that can be disproven. Use them as reference and you reprint the myths and mistakes.



Closing Summary

Today, there are less than one dozen historians of old-time radio who research and publish their findings. For three of them, researching old-time radio is a full-time job. These numbers are expected to dwindle over the coming years. It is expected that, on occasion, there will be revived interest and possibly additional discoveries to be published. It is my hope that this essay will provide a primer for those newcomers.

Naturally, there is more to researching old-time radio than the bullet points provided here. With limited space I chose to provide the basic 101. Perhaps in the future I will provide a follow-up piece for those who want to learn 102. I welcome any feedback and additional suggestions for a possible revision of this article in the coming years.

