

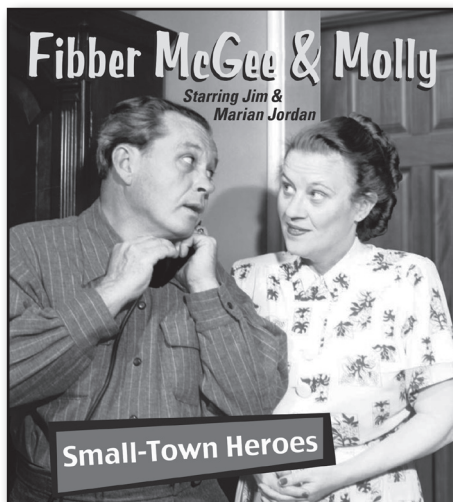
# FIBBER McGEE & MOLLY

## Small-Town Heroes

Program Guide by Elizabeth McLeod

The distance from Peoria, Illinois to Hollywood, California as the crow flies is 1,634 miles. By train, add about three hundred miles to that for a two and a half day trip. By car or bus, even longer. However you travel, it's quite a haul. But put yourself in the early 1940s for just a moment, and Peoria and Hollywood seem even further apart -- not so much in distance, but in mindset. "Peoria" had a certain meaning in those days. It was a shorthand term for a quiet, small midwestern city with a quiet midwestern way of looking at life. Hollywood? Well, it wasn't Peoria.

So imagine going from Peoria to Hollywood...not to see the sights, but to work in show business. And not just to work in show business, but to attain a very high peak of success. That would probably change you, wouldn't it? You might leave Peoria in your high-button shoes and your picture hat, but as soon as you put on that first pair of sunglasses and head down Sunset Boulevard, watch out. "Peoria? That hick town? Not me, baby."



Unless you're Jim and Marian Jordan, that is.

By the early 1940s their native Peoria was a long time ago for this amiable middle-aged couple. They were radio veterans, climbing from dollar-a-holler 1920s small time broadcasting to the big time at NBC Chicago. They'd been network stars for the better part of a decade. And in 1939, they packed up their gags and headed to Hollywood for good. That southern California town was fast

becoming the center for Big Time Radio, and that's where the Jordans had to go if they wanted to keep up. Of course, they weren't just going to "keep up" -- they'd already made a successful feature film by this point, and their radio show was growing more popular every season. In fact, by 1940, they were more than just popular -- they were beloved. *Fibber McGee & Molly* was a regular, dominating feature of Tuesday night entertainment for more than thirty million listeners across the United States, Canada, and the Caribbean. But you wouldn't see Jim and Marian Jordan making a grand entrance at the Cocoanut Grove, or playing the ponies at Santa Anita. Because they never "went Hollywood," and neither did their program.

And that was the secret of its success.

On the radio, Fibber McGee was a typical small-town blowhard. He was the kind of talk-big, do-little character you can find in any neighborhood, someone whose reach was never quite up to his grasp. And Molly was his head-shaking, eye-rolling wife, a sensible Irishwoman who'd learned from long experience to let her husband dig himself into whatever hole he wanted (because nobody could ever talk him out of it). The real-life Jordans, of course, weren't like that -- Jim Jordan was a quiet homebody type of fellow, and Marian Jordan had an outer calm that belied internal fears and conflicts that once put her off the air for more than a year and a half. But deep down, they were the same sort of good-hearted small-town folk as their characters -- and it was that note of authenticity that helped them bring those characters to such vivid life that it was hard to imagine them reading their dialogue off a typed script. The program sounded and seemed that spontaneous, that genuine, that real.

The unforced nature of the Jordans' performances was vital to the success of the program -- but so was the man who created the characters and put the words in their mouths. His name was Don Quinn, and like so many of the creative talents who surged into the broadcast medium during the early years of network radio, he entered the studios through a side door. He had been a young Chicago advertising copywriter who tried, with little success, for a career in magazine cartooning. Quinn had a way with clever lines, though -- and he would later claim that editors kept his captions and threw his cartoons away. Words without pictures seemed a natural match for radio, and Quinn soon found his fortune in the Jordans. Those pleasant young entertainers from Peoria had been knocking around the Chicago studios for about five years. They appeared in a variety of music, light comedy, and dramatic formats (centering around stations WENR and WMAQ). It was at the latter station that Quinn devised a clever showcase for the Jordans'

comedic and musical talents, casting them in a program called *Smackout: The Cross-Roads of the Air*. Jim Jordan played Luke Gray, a querulous small-town grocer whose crossroads general store was always “smack out” of whatever commodity might be required. But Luke was never smack out of tall stories, and he’d spin them at a moments’ notice...especially for a young girl named Teeny. She, of course, was played by Marian Jordan, who adopted piping, lisping tones for the role. The Jordans also appeared on the program as “Marian and Jim,” a pleasant young couple who contributed occasional musical numbers to break up the comedy. Quinn gave these characters a thin thread of continuing storyline to carry them from episode to episode. By 1933, *Smackout* gained enough attention to earn a daytime slot on NBC, and sponsors were taking note of it.

In early 1935, the S. C. Johnson & Son Company of Racine, Wisconsin wanted a new weekly half hour -- and *Smackout* would form its nucleus. Quinn took the basic framework of the Luke Gray character, took him out of the store, and gave him a feisty Irish wife. He set the two of them on a cross-country road trip intended to promote Johnson’s “Carnu” automobile polish. He called them “Fibber McGee and Molly.” The program premiered in April to no particular acclaim, but the Johnson company (an organization with a solidly midwestern point of view) enjoyed the show and the likeable tone of the comedy. They decided to keep it going. That summer, Quinn tired of the road-trip conceit and had the McGees win a house in a raffle. He had them settle down in a subdivision called “Wistful Vista”...and there they would stay for the next quarter century.

*Fibber McGee and Molly* developed slowly over the second half of the 1930s. It was never a blockbuster, never a top-ten attraction, but it had an engaging, pleasant feel that never demanded too much from its audience. The comedy was broad and cartoony, but the characters themselves remained believable. You could spend half an hour listening to the show and enjoy the experience, but you didn’t quote the jokes the next day at work. It wasn’t that kind of program... at least, not yet.

The turning point for the program came in late 1937, when Marian Jordan’s nerves caught up with her. She had never been entirely comfortable as a performer, and the stresses of the weekly broadcast led her to seek the calming effects of alcohol. During the summer of 1937, the Jordans were signed to perform in a feature film for RKO (*This Way Please*), which



Jim and Marian Jordan

added to Marian's stresses. The drinking worsened. On November 1, 1937 she gave what many feared was her final performance as Molly. For the next eighteen months, she was off the air -- undergoing treatment for what the press of the time described as "nervous exhaustion." Jim Jordan carried on, with the program retitled *Fibber McGee and Company*. Don Quinn found himself challenged to come up with engaging characters to fill the very large hole that Marian's departure left in the program. With the help of versatile character actors Harold Peary, Bill Thompson, and Isabel Randolph, he got the job done -- building up Wistful Vista as a community full of broad eccentrics fully capable of standing up to Fibber's blowhard guff.

By the time Marian returned to the series in the spring of 1939, *Fibber McGee and Molly* was a very different program from the one she'd left. Quinn's comedy was sharper and faster-paced, the supporting cast was well-honed, and the overall tone of the show had shifted to a more contemporary style of humor. Fibber and Molly were still folksy small-town people, but they now had plenty of wise-cracking, fast-moving gagsters to act as their foils. Bill Thompson (below), an expert dialectician, was a vital figure in the development of this new tone. His versatile and expressive voice gave life to such characters as The Old Timer and Horatio K. Boomer. Isabel Randolph offered a tart portrayal of society dowager Abigail Uppington. And Harold Peary was fast approaching breakout status for his portrayal of a long series of stuffed shirts named Gildersleeve. Even the music, now conducted by bouncy, bald-headed Billy Mills, sounded fresh and modern.

There was one other major change, perhaps the biggest change of all. At the end of January 1939, the Jordans and Quinn (along with Randolph, Thompson, and Peary) left Chicago for Hollywood -- which would be Fibber and Molly's home base for the rest of the character's lives. The move was part of an overall westward shift for big-time radio, with the former production centers of New York and Chicago giving way to the movie capital. There, movie and radio talent could more easily mingle. An overall Hollywoodization of program content was inevitable...but not for *Fibber McGee and Molly*. You never heard Fibber making jokes about Santa Anita, Palm Springs, the Brown Derby, the LaBrea Tar Pits, or who said what to whom last night at Ciro's. Don Quinn saw to it that the comic approach of the program remained firmly rooted in who the Jordans really were -- nice small town people, who happened to step before a microphone every week to tell some jokes and have some fun.



Bill Thompson

And by 1940, this style of humor stood out. Big time radio at the turn of the new decade was a lot of things, but folksy wasn't one of them. Radio was becoming slick and polished and even manufactured in its tone -- but Fibber and Molly remained as they'd always been. Their supporting characters had better material than they'd had in Chicago, with Quinn sharpening up with the times...but without betraying the essence of the program. The big, broad, friendly laughs were still there. The program's new Tuesday night time slot, right before rising movie-radio star Bob Hope, was habit-forming. Audiences parked their dials at NBC on Tuesday nights and kept it there -- and *Fibber McGee and Molly* zoomed toward the top of the rating charts.

There were bound to be changes along the way. A dignified, handsome Hollywood announcer-actor named Gale Gordon demonstrated an awe-inspiring gift for pompous stack-blowing as the chief executive of Wistful Vista, Mayor LaTrivia. Harold Peary became so popular after his character coalesced into the one and only Throckmorton P. Gildersleeve that he left Wistful Vista in the summer of 1941 for his own program. And Bill Thompson, continuing to experiment with new voices and new characterizations, hit the jackpot when he puffed out his cheeks, loosened his tongue, and sputtered out laments about his "big old wife" as the unforgettable Wallace Wimple.

The Jordans and Quinn, who owned the program as a three-way partnership, were at the height of their success as the United States entered the Second World War at the end of 1941. And they stayed there right through the war years, always in that same Tuesday night time slot, always in that same accessible comic style that carried along a pleasant whiff of old-time Peoria in an age where Americans were too busy fighting Fascism to have much time for nostalgia. A corny phrase of the time was "That's what we're fighting for," whenever any old-timey small-town subject came up -- and the gentle humor of *Fibber McGee and Molly* fit that description perhaps better than any other comedy show on the air.

**S. C. JOHNSON & SON INC.**  
**Presents**  
**JIM AND MARIAN JORDAN**  
**as**  
**FIBBER McGEE and MOLLY**

**Written by DON QUINN**

With  
**Bill Thompson**  
**Gale Gordon**  
and **Isabel Randolph**

Featuring vocals by **The King's Men:**  
**Ken Darby, Rad Robinson, Jon Dodson, and Bud Linn**  
and **Martha Tilton**

Music conducted by  
**Billy Mills**

**Harlow Wilcox announcing**

Sound Effects by  
**Frank Pittman**

Produced and Directed by  
**Cecil Underwood**

**CD 1A: New Furniture – November 4, 1941**

The McGees end up on a bit of shopping spree when they go out to purchase a new davenport.

**CD 1B: Bergen and McCarthy Come To Movie Premiere – November 11, 1941**

Guests Edgar Bergen and Charlie McCarthy come to Wistful Vista for the debut of *Look Who's Laughing*.



Jim and Marian Jordan with Edgar Bergen and Charlie McCarthy

**CD 2A: 40% Off – December 9, 1941**

Fibber promises his friends that he can get them 40 percent off on their Christmas shopping. Note: This episode is preceded by a news bulletin from Robert St. John.

**CD 2B: Fix It McGee – December 30, 1941**

Fibber's gotten the door chime working and is now ready for other projects.

**CD 3A: Mrs. Uppington's Window (Part 1) – January 13, 1942**

In this first installment of a two-part storyline, Mrs. Uppington suffers a bout of property damage.

**CD 3B: Mrs. Uppington's Window (Part 2) – January 20, 1942**

The window-breaker remains at large!

**CD 4A: Molly's Lost Diamond Ring – February 3, 1942**

What happened to Molly's diamond engagement ring?

**CD 4B: Valentine Candy – February 10, 1942**

Molly gets a big box of Valentine's candy -- but did Fibber send it?

**CD 5A: Fibber's Home Movie – February 17, 1942**

The McGees rent a camera. Hilarity ensues.

**CD 5B: Boomer's Suitcase – March 3, 1942**

What's in Horatio K. Boomer's suitcase?

**CD 6A: Fibber Writes a Song – March 24, 1942**

Here comes Fibber's new song: "The War Stamp Stomp!"

**CD 6B: Clean Out Closet For Scrap Drive – April 7, 1942**

Fibber's closet is opened...and is a scrap drive all in itself.

**CD 7A: Spring Festival Parade – April 14, 1942**

Fibber and Molly gear up to lead the Wistful Vista Spring Festival Parade.

**CD 7B: Fibber's Old Straw Hat  
– April 28, 1942**

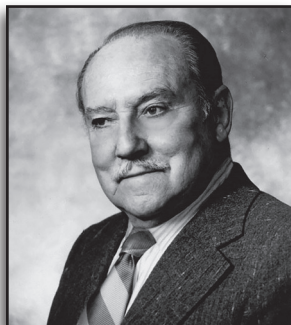
Fibber's straw hat needs a cleaning.

**CD 8A: Spy – May 12, 1942**

Fibber's convinced he's on the trail of an enemy spy!

**CD 8B: Pot Roast For Dinner – June 9, 1942**

Fibber wants pot roast in the worst way -- and that's just how he'll get it!



Gale Gordon is heard as Mayor LaTrivia.

**CD 9A: Packing for Vacation (Locked Suitcase) – June 23, 1942**

Meredith Willson and John Nesbitt (right), hosts of the Johnson Wax summer show, help the McGees pack for their vacation. Or they would, if Fibber hadn't locked the suitcase key in his suitcase.



Meredith Willson



John Nesbitt

**CD 9B: Back From Vacation (Lost Camera) – September 29, 1942**

The McGees return from their vacation minus their camera -- and Fibber's fuming!

**CD 10A: Fibber Converts Furnace to Coal - October 13, 1942**

It seems that Mr. McGee wants to make a significant change to his household fuel management plan.

**CD 10B: Family Tree – October 20, 1942**

Fibber does some research into his ancestry.

Elizabeth McLeod is a journalist, author, and broadcast historian. She received the 2005 Ray Stanich Award for excellence in broadcasting history research from the Friends Of Old Time Radio.



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