

NOW WE'RE TOLKIN'



By Helen Marketti

CLEVELAND TV TALES

An interview with Author Mike Olszewski

If you have lived in Cleveland and the surrounding areas for most of your life chances are you have seen or heard about some of these great television personalities that made an appearance each week or each day whenever we tuned in for entertainment or news.

In their new book, *Cleveland TV Tales* (Gray & Company, 2014), Mike and Janice Olszewski have captured the stories of what made Cleveland a buzzing hub with the famous names that we've come to know, love and recognize. Ghoualdi (Ernie Anderson), Linn Sheldon (Barnaby), Ron Penfound (Captain Penny), Miss Barbara (Romper Room), Dorothy Fuldheim, Gene Carroll, Jim Doney's Adventure Road and the talented list continues.

The book is a nostalgic read through a time when Cleveland TV programs were thought of as cutting edge. It will bring back memories of days gone by with the television personalities we felt we knew as well as our own family.

Mike Olszewski is a veteran of Cleveland radio (WERE, WMMS) and is the archivist and curator for the Ohio Broadcast Archive and Museum.

"I first became interested in radio when I was a kid because my grandmother used to listen to some of the old radio plays during the 50s and 60s. She enjoyed listening to the programs. She would tell me about this magical world of radio and all of the characters. It was a wonderful theatre of the mind," said Mike. "I really got into radio during the 60s with Top 40 playing on WIXY 1260 and of course WNCR, WMMS and KYW. I started out with news broadcasts at WERE and after close to ten years went to WMMS. One of the reasons I got into radio was the free form format, which was the most exciting thing that I had ever heard. I was able to work with many Cleveland legends."

Mike has the Ohio Broadcast Archive and Museum at the University of Akron. He is considering having the information available on line. "The artifacts are wonderful and if anyone wants to donate an item that would be great. Many artifacts that we recognize and/or grew up with should be preserved. The most important items are photos, recorded voices and video of the people who shaped our lives when we were kids such as Jerry G and many others."

While Cleveland has its wealth of history in radio, it has quite a visual history of TV personalities who have kept many generations company throughout the years. "Media is like a water tap," said Mike. "You turn it on or off when you need it and when you don't really think about it. These people affected our lives because we considered them part of our family."

"My wife, Janice was critical in her research to help make this book happen. We wanted to set many stories straight. I had seen so much of it firsthand but took myself out of it so I could write from an impartial perspective. We wanted an impartial history of the Cleveland television scene. This book tells the stories about the people who were in the industry, what shaped them and what they thought. Many of the people we talked to did not think of themselves as pioneers of Cleveland television but just doing to their job."

Mike continues, "We wanted the legacy and the history of these wonderful people to be remembered. Quite honestly, we are already in a generation that doesn't watch as much TV. Twenty years from now, who is going to remember Dorothy Fuldheim and all of those people that were so important. Dorothy was one tough woman who never put up with any nonsense. It was a very segregated and sexist time during the 40s and 50s. It's amazing to think that the first employee of WEWS was a Jewish woman in her 50s! That is truly remarkable and you have to salute the people who had such great foresight. Dorothy remained sharp as a tack and still worked until her early 90s."

Many television personalities emerged from Cleveland. "When Linn Sheldon (Barnaby) closed his show by telling the viewers that "if anyone calls, tell them that Barnaby said hello and that you are the nicest person in the whole world, just you." You believed it because you felt sure he was talking to you. Linn was Cleveland's biggest star during the 40s and the highest paid actor," said Mike. "Ernie Anderson who played Ghoualdi didn't think he was that funny but he was *that funny*. Ron Penfound (Captain Penny) was on the air for 17 years. He was also the one that referenced The Three Stooges as Larry, Curly and Moe when they were originally known as Larry, Moe and Curly. Ron's roommate in college was Paul Newman, another Cleveland native."

"Jim Backus who played Thurston Howell on *Giligan's Island* and also the voice of Mr. Magoo based his character roles on people he knew in real life. Thurston Howell was based on Jim's neighbor in the Bratenahl area of Cleveland."

Another Cleveland treasure was watching Jim Doney's *Adventure Road*. "That program was the first local TV show in color," said Mike. "Jim showed people's vacation movies. The show lasted for several years."

Mike and his wife, Janice are working on a sequel to *Cleveland TV Tales* which may include work on a documentary.

"These wonderful people didn't see themselves in terms of breaking new ground for future generations. They sold themselves on personality and talent. This is how they lasted for so many years. They were our TV heroes yet they were accessible and bigger than life."

If you have any items that might be suitable for the Ohio Broadcast Archive & Museum, please contact Mike Olszewski.
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