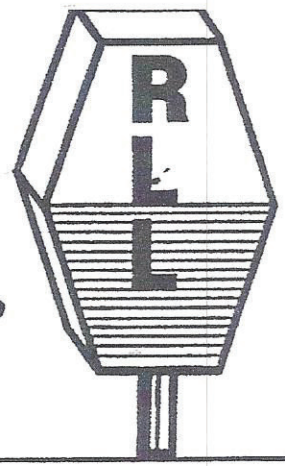




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On the Air

THE FBI IN RADIO HISTORY

By Jack French © 2013

There have been many OTR series which featured the Federal Bureau of Investigation throughout history. Most of them were not authorized by the Bureau nor were they based on FBI actual cases, but rather whatever the script writer created. Therefore the accuracy of these accounts varied greatly, although not all of the listeners knew the difference. Only a few of these "FBI programs" had the cooperation of this federal agency.

The first radio series to feature the FBI was "The Lucky Strike Hour" (guess who the sponsor was) which originated on NBC on October 25, 1932 and ran for three months, ending in February 1933. Of the 18 episodes aired, 15 of them were based upon FBI cases, summaries of which had been given by the FBI to the producer, George F. Zimmer, who handed them to his script writers who "adapted" them into radio scripts. The FBI believed the series to be accurate, not overly dramatic, and well received by the listening public.

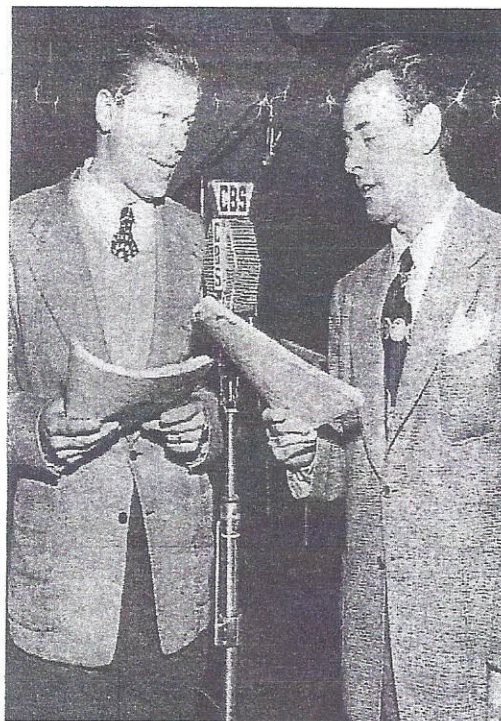
However Zimmer lost the good will and trust of the FBI when, without their permission, he used some of those FBI materials to later produce a syn-

dicated series, "Agent K-7" in 1935. It was a flamboyant adventure series with little basis in fact. Although it was not successful, Zimmer recycled it in the early 1950's under the title "Mystery Agent

K-7 Returns" and marketed it in the Midwest. The FBI was not amused and retained a "hands-off" policy towards Zimmer. Incidentally, an OTR pal of mine, Jim Snyder, used to joke that "Agent K-7," should have been called "Agent K-9" 'because it was such a dog. Today's listeners would probably have the same opinion.

In early summer of 1935, four different entities were vying to produce a new FBI series, one of them headed up by a friend of the Bureau, author Courtney Riley Cooper, and another group led by Phillips H. Lord. The FBI preferred Cooper but Attorney General Homer Cummings overruled them and gave the go-ahead to Lord. On July 20, 1935 Lord's new series, "G-Men," sponsored by Chevrolet, debuted with the story of

John Dillinger. The series ran for only 13 weeks, perhaps because of the FBI's grudging cooperation since they disliked the show as being too dramatic.



Donald Briggs, field service agent supervisor Andrews and Martin Blaine, top field agent Sheppard in "The FBI In War & Peace."

So, in January 1936, Lord next launched "Gang Busters:" for which he did not want or need any FBI assistance. As all OTR fans know, this series was very successful and would run for over two decades. In some respects, its popularity remains undiminished today and many people now use the expression "Coming on like Gang Busters" without ever knowing its origin.

There was no love lost between Lord and Hoover, and in the early years of "Gang Busters" the bureau would not even provide the producers with information on FBI wanted fugitives. But these details were public knowledge since anyone could copy the descriptions on wanted posters on display in every post office. "Gang Busters" listeners eventually provided information leading to the arrest of so many fugitives wanted by the FBI that Hoover was forced into a small measure of humble cooperation. On the 14th anniversary of the show, Hoover sent a telegram which was read on the air. His telegram said, in part: "The clues broadcast on "Gang Busters" have assisted in many apprehensions. Therefore be sure to listen carefully when these clues are given."

But there were many more radio series depicting fictional FBI Agents in action for which the Bureau adopted a "no comment" attitude. These included: "White Eagles," a syndicated series distributed by Conquest Alliance Company and starring John McIntyre as a G-Man; "Top Secrets of the FBI," narrated by former FBI official Melvin Purvis for Mutual; a silly juvenile syndicated series called "Junior G-Men," and even a 1940 BBC ten-minute program entitled "G-Men at Work." But it wasn't until 1944 that a radio series was proposed which really upset J. Edgar Hoover and the FBI.

During World War II, the FBI provided a large amount of summaries of closed cases, which portrayed the Agency in a very favorable light, to author Frederick L. Collins, who had an agreement with the Bureau to write a book on their exploits. The book, entitled **THE FBI IN PEACE AND WAR** published by G.P. Putnam's Sons, came out in 1943, and quickly became a best-seller. The resultant success made Hoover and the FBI happy and the royalties made Collins even happier.

The following year, Collins took the book to CBS to promote it as a new radio series. As soon as the

FBI got word of this, they protested to CBS that Collins had no authority to market his book about the Bureau for broadcast purposes. They claimed that his access to FBI summaries (which they had furnished) was for the sole purpose of writing his book, and no radio rights were given or implied. CBS and Collins put the matter to Hoover's superiors at the Department of Justice. Hoover was overruled, just as he was in the dispute with Phillips H. Lord, and the CBS radio series, using the title of Collins' book, was launched in late November 1944.

While Hoover and the FBI may have secretly hoped the series would fail, it certainly did not. Its ratings were excellent, its Lava theme music (cribbed from Prokofiev's "Love for Three Oranges") was very popular, and although the series used up all of the FBI cases in Collins' book before the first year ended, the scripts continued to flow. Several years ago I spoke to Betty Mandeville at the Friends of Old-Time Radio convention in Newark.

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When she became the director of "The FBI in Peace and War" she was the only female director of a network crime show in prime time. She recalled they only used about a dozen stories from Collins' book to

generate scripts. Thereafter, their writers (usually Louis Pelletier or Jacques Finke) merely created original stories but Collins still got name credit and \$50 in royalties for every episode.

One may speculate on what was more galling to Hoover and the FBI, the fact that an author had outfoxed them and obtained a successful radio series, or the fact that most of the listening public thought the program was actually sanctioned by the FBI. Even Walter Winchell got into the act; in one of his columns he chided Hoover because the radio show used theme music composed by a Communist. Of course, Prokofiev was Russian but not a Communist, and this was definitely not the FBI's radio show, however Winchell's barb must have stung in Bureau circles.

The FBI decided to fight fire with fire. Overtures were put out in 1945 to other networks that the FBI would cooperate fully with any radio project that would feature the FBI cases in a suitable fashion. ABC indicated interest and Jerry Devine (1908-1994) became the point man on this project.

He was given the grand tour of FBI headquarters as well as the FBI Training Academy at Quantico, Va. Devine had a strong background in radio, mostly writing, starting in comedy with the "Kate Smith Show" and "Tommy Riggs." He had moved on to crime adventures, writing for both "Mr. District Attorney" as well as "The Shadow."

Many of the decisions on the show were made jointly by the FBI and Devine, acting for ABC. The show would be produced by ABC in their New York City Studios. Both parties were agreeable to accepting the sponsorship of The Equitable Life Assurance Society, a large insurance and mortgage company founded in 1859. During its boom years following the Civil War, its board of directors could boast Ulysses S. Grant and John Jacob Astor. By 1942 it had expanded its business to include real estate development and had built a series of apartment complexes in Brooklyn.

Devine would produce the show and act as liaison with the Bureau, facilitating the flow of summaries of FBI cases to his

script writers, Lawrence MacArthur and Frank Phares. The program would have a live orchestra for the theme and bridges; Nathan Van

Cleave would be the musical director. For the program's director, Devine chose William "Bill" Sweets (1895-1968). He had an impressive resume, as a writer on the soaps (including "Big Sister") and also was the first director on the "The Shadow." He later directed "The Adventures of Father Brown" as well as "Cavalcade of America." (The FBI would have to ignore the fact he also directed two series for Phillips H. Lord: "Counterspy" and "Gang Busters.")

While many shows of that era had the announcer also narrate the show, Devine split those duties and had one of each for his series. Milton Cross and later Carl Frank were the announcers while Frank Lovejoy (1912-1962) was the narrator and was followed by Dean Carlton. Lovejoy did not leave the series; he was also the voice for J. Edgar Hoover so he couldn't also be the narrator. When not playing Hoover, Lovejoy played other small roles in the show.

The series debuted on April 6, 1945 and would run weekly on Friday nights. For the first year, many of the shows involved well-known cases of the FBI from the gangster era of the 1930s. Infa-

mous robbers and thieves who had been brought to justice by the FBI were given one more burst of notoriety in the radio scripts. Sometimes, if the criminal was deceased, his real name might be used on the air. In other cases portrayed, both ABC and the Bureau seemed reluctant to use the actual name of a criminal still behind bars. Example: when the story of "Machine Gun" Kelly was aired the third week of the series, his name was changed to "Shot-Gun Hadley." Yet every detail of Kelly's kidnapping of Oklahoma business man, Charles Urschell in July 1933 was set forth on the program with compelling accuracy. Kelly, who was nabbed by the FBI in September 1933, was still serving out a life sentence in Leavenworth Penitentiary when "his" program was broadcast in 1945. (History has not recorded whether or not he heard the broadcast in his cell.)

For the first few years, there was no "lead" in the show. A series of actors portrayed various FBI Agents in a myriad of different locations and periods in FBI history.

During the three years it was produced in Manhattan, dozens of the better radio actors had roles on the show on a regular basis. These included Mandel Kramer, Karl

Swenson, Santos Ortega, Elspeth Eric, Paul Mann, Helen Lewis, Lesley Woods, Frank Lovejoy and his wife, Joan Banks Lovejoy.

In 1948, "This Is Your FBI" production was shifted to Hollywood, a not uncommon move for a network show since many New York and Chicago programs also moved to the Los Angeles area, in the late Forties. There were some personnel changes made as a result of the move. Frederick Stein took over as the musical director. William Woodson became the narrator while the announcer job was filled by Larry Keating. Both would hold those positions for the rest of the run, although if Keating had a conflict, his substitute was Bill Spargrove. Another change was that Jerry D. Lewis became the primary writer.

The most noticeable change was reformatting the series so that one FBI Agent solved every case. In the past a multitude of agents took turns solving crimes and apprehending the perpetrators. While that was more realistic, it had the problem of sustaining listener loyalty since they preferred one hero in the lead. So Agent Jim Taylor was created and no matter where in the country the crime oc-

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curred, Taylor was there to bring the guilty to justice. Stacy Harris (1918-1973), a transplanted Canadian, was chosen for this role. He had a long history of good microphone work on the soaps ("Dr. Kildare," "Pepper Young's Family"), and adventure dramas ("Frontier Gentleman," "Nightbeat"). His best prior role as a crime fighter was on the "The Adventures of Superman" where he was one of three actors who played Batman at different times.

Drawing from the west coast talent pool, Sweets must have had an easy time in casting his shows. He did not try to form a "rep company" of supporting cast; he merely cast each show separately. As a result, hundreds of different actors appeared on the series during the nearly six years it aired weekly from Hollywood. Many of them are familiar to old-time radio fans today: Bill Conrad, Herb Ellis, Carleton Young, Georgia Ellis, Parley Baer, Tony Barrett, Dick Crenna, Ted de Corsia, Bea Benadaret, Sam Edwards, Helen Kleeb, Herb Butterfield, Lou Merrill, Barney Phillips, Jim Backus, Gill Stratton, Jr., and Bill Johnstone. In addition, Sweets occasionally hired movie actors in his supporting cast so some programs had Harry Carey, Jr., Mae Clarke, or Billy Halop.

Sound effects personnel are invariably not included in the closing credits and that was also true on this series. At different times, either two or three of these men produced the sounds that made this show great: Joe Cabbibo, Monty Frazer, James Flynn and Virgil Reimer.

The Equitable Life Assurance Society sponsored the series for virtually the entire run, all but the last year. Its commercials, one at the beginning of each episode, another in the middle, and one at the close, were all carefully scripted. Their insurance sales staff was always called "Society representatives," never insurance salesmen. Most of the commercials talked about financial security, peace of mind, family protection, and never once were policy premiums mentioned. To its credit, the sponsor was generous in airing many public service announcements, including asking for support of blood drives, fighting infantile paralysis, promoting the sale of savings bonds, etc.

In any dramatic radio series about law enforcement, certain compromises have to be made. It may have taken dozens of agents several months to solve a real case, but Jim Taylor had to do it alone in half an hour. Laboratory results usually took

weeks in real time but Taylor accomplished this with a quick telephone call. Agents spend much of their time writing and reading reports, interviewing suspects, covering dead ends, firearms training, squad conferences, and inventorying evidence. But all these would seem dull on radio so they were minimized.

Most of the scripts could be aired any time of the year, but there were a few written specifically for a holiday airing, and two examples of this can be found in this boxed set. The episode "Snow Screen" is a Christmas story with a happy ending. Another episode, "The Larceny Express," includes a tribute to Memorial Day in discussing honoring our war dead and concluding with a reading of the FBI Service Martyrs, 16 of whom had been killed up to the broadcast date. On the other hand, "The Evil Samaritan" aired on October 31, 1952 and contains not one mention of Halloween.

Not even the scrutiny of the FBI agents who reviewed the scripts, along with Jerry Devine, could prevent all errors. In "Henpecked Hijacker" two

The episode "Snow Screen" is a Christmas story with a happy ending.

obvious mistakes are made. First of all, the title is incorrect since the story establishes that the chief criminal is a stock swindler and there is no mention of hijacking in the episode. Secondly, an agent in the FBI office, talking to Jim Taylor on the telephone, asks him "Think I should get a warrant before I leave the office?" Since a federal warrant can be issued only by a judge or a magistrate, neither of whom would be in the FBI office, the offer is an impossibility.

Nevertheless, the programs had a ring of authenticity that no other FBI radio shows could match, although "The FBI in Peace and War" came the closest. The scripts of "This Is Your FBI" were sprinkled with precise Bureau terminology, with no definitions for the uninitiated: SAC, field office, Law Enforcement Bulletin, Petrology Section of the Laboratory, National Academy, resident agent, etc. And Stacy Harris in the lead always introduced himself in the approved Bureau manner: "I'm Special Agent Jim Taylor of the FBI; these are my credentials."

Meanwhile over at CBS, "The FBI in Peace and War" rolled on, usually a few percentage points in front of its rival. Despite the fact that the network kept moving the program's time slot (from Saturday to Thursday to Friday, then back to Thursday, then Wednesday and finally Sunday) the series con-

tinued to attract steady listeners. Nor was there any difficulty in finding sponsors. Lava Soap, a product of Proctor & Gamble in that era, is the sponsor most remembered today since its booming commercial of L-A-V-A, L-A-V-A became so popular. When that company bowed out of sponsorship in 1950, Wildroot Cream Oil quickly took over paying the bills. It was followed by Lucky Strike, Nescafe, and finally Wrigley's Gum.

Martin Blaine portrayed the lead in "The FBI in Peace and War" as Agent Sheppard. His supervisor was Mr. Andrews, played by Donald Briggs. Most of the better radio actors in the Manhattan area were eventually in a supporting role in this series. They included Jackson Beck, Rosemary Rice, Ralph Bell, Ed Bagley, Frank Readick, Charita Bauer, and Bob Dryden among many others.

ABC finally ended "This Is Your FBI" on January 30, 1953 after logging 409 episodes. Because the show had been transcribed from the beginning, and since most of the shows were replayed overseas on the Armed Forces Radio Service (AFRS), all of the broadcasts survived. Despite its long run, it did not approach the duration of its rival series, "The FBI in Peace and War," which CBS continued to broadcast until September 28, 1958, thus exceeding the other "real" FBI series by nearly six years.

But "This Is Your FBI" would have a second life since the show was resurrected in Great Britain after it finished its U.S. run. In the mid-50s, Percy Hoskins of the London Daily Express got a BBC contract to provide scripts for a series on the FBI. With the permission of the FBI, Jerry Devine sold Hoskins the radio scripts previously used for "This Is Your FBI." Hoskins then wrote additional material to fill the gaps where the commercials had been and the series, re-named "G-Men" was broadcast by the BBC. The name change had been necessary since in England, FBI is the well-known abbreviation for Federation of British Industries.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR: Jack French is a retired FBI Agent and vintage radio historian who will be presenting a program on FBI history on radio at the Mid-Atlantic Nostalgia Convention in September 2013. His book, **PRIVATE EYELASHES: RADIO'S LADY DETECTIVES** won the Agatha Award for Best Non-Fiction. He and David S. Siegel compiled (along with 20 other contributors) a new McFarland book. **RADIO RIDES THE RANGE: A REFERENCE GUIDE TO WESTERN DRAMA ON THE AIR, 1929-1967** is posted on McFarland site now and will be released this fall.