

# The Man Who Came to Breakfast

"You have no future in radio," Don McNeill was told, but he's celebrating his 25th anniversary on the top daytime program.

by Alfred Balk

WHEN THE DEPRESSION made laughter at any hour difficult, a young man in Chicago set out to make sleepy radio listeners chuckle over their morning coffee. Few sponsors—or anyone else—thought he could do it. But Don McNeill got laughs and listeners—and sponsors on long-term contracts. So many, in fact, that on Monday the American Broadcasting Company will salute the silver anniversary of Don McNeill's Breakfast Club—the oldest daytime show in broadcasting.

In that time, McNeill, 50, has hardly changed his recipe of corn, droll Americana, and touches of plain-folk sentiment and religious inspiration. Skits, interviews, music, verse, gags, human interest—Don and his cast use them all and will do anything, if it's clean, for a laugh.

Punchy, sad-eyed Sam Cowling, McNeill's chief heckler, has been around for 20 years. He will dress in a nightshirt, dive against a drum, sit on women's laps, or pretend to shave with a hand mike. Almost every day, a highlight of the show is a trumpet blare announcing "Fact and Fiction from Sam's Almanac." Such as:

"Fifty per cent of the married people in Denver are women." Or, "The distance from the head of a fox to its tail is—a fur piece."

Another veteran is Fran Allison (of Kukla, Fran, and Ollie fame) who carries on as the homespun spinster, Aunt Fanny. The largely daffy atmosphere of the Breakfast Club



Don conducts interview with nimble inverted gymnast.



McNeill presents gifts from his many listeners to Salvation Army colonel.



Portrait of the emcee as a young man: Don made many smile in 1933.



McNeill with a side-kick of many a fun-provoking program over the years—Fran Allison in her role as Aunt Fanny.



Another veteran who has contributed to the perennial success of the Breakfast Club is Sam Cowling, who'll do anything for a gag.

draws about two million listeners each week-day morning. Among them, in addition to the housewife in Davenport, Ia., are Supreme Court Justice William O. Douglas, FBI chief J. Edgar Hoover, and Texas oilman Glenn McCarthy. This vast listening audience has made the program the most valuable daytime property in radio, good for \$5 million annually in advertising revenue.

Over the years McNeill and his show have put many performers on the road to stardom. Among them have been Fibber McGee and Molly, Bill Thompson (Mr. Wimple), the Merry Macs, the Songfellows, and Homer and Jethro.

Though the Breakfast Club preserves a high degree of spontaneity, some of it is plotted in advance. The studio audience turns in information cards, which are sifted for odd occupations, strange requests, or other unusual items by producer Cliff Peterson and writer Eddie McKean. When McNeill arrives in Chicago's Loop from suburban Winnetka, he selects several of the most promising cards, and when the show is ready to go on the air, he knows whom he'll call for interviews and has already made up a few gags about them.

The program has its serious moments, such as "Memory Time," a two-minute segment of homesy verse sent in by a listener; or a "Sunshine Shower," in which McNeill suggests sending cards and letters to various rest-home residents or hospital patients.

But the feature with the most impact probably is the "Moment of Silent Prayer." Begun as an inter-faith prayer

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