

**The Thesis committee for Steven Vern Reddicliffe**

**Certifies that this is the approved version of the following thesis**

**Voices of Comedy: Conversations With Writers of Television's Most Enduring Shows**

**APPROVED BY**

**SUPERVISING COMMITTEE:**

**Supervisor:** \_\_\_\_\_

Janet Staiger

\_\_\_\_\_  
Michael Kackman

**Voices of Comedy: Conversations With Writers of Television's Most Enduring Shows**

by

Steven Vern Reddicliffe, B.S.J.

**Thesis**

Presented to the Faculty of the Graduate School

of the University of Texas at Austin

in Partial Fulfillment

of the Requirements

for the Degree of

**Master of Arts**

The University of Texas at Austin

August 2010

## **Voices of Comedy: Conversations With Writers of Television's Most Enduring Shows**

by

Steven Vern Reddicliffe, MA

The University of Texas at Austin, 2010

SUPERVISOR: Janet Staiger

An oral history of television comedy from the early 1950s through the mid 1970s as told by the writers Sydney Zelinka, Larry Rhine, Milt Josefsberg, and the team of Seaman Jacobs and Fred S. Fox. The shows they wrote for included “The Honeymooners,” “The Phil Silvers Show,” “The Red Skelton Hour,” Bob Hope specials, “Here’s Lucy,” “All in the Family,” and “Maude.” These five writers were working in the earliest days of the medium and spent years writing for the personalities—from performers to producers—who pioneered and defined it. Most of them also wrote scripts during one of broadcast television’s greatest periods of transformation, when comedy took a decidedly topical turn that continued to have a significant impact on television comedy in the decades that followed.

## Table of Contents

Introduction .....	1
Chapter One: Sydney Zelinka .....	15
Chapter Two: Larry Rhine .....	32
Chapter Three: Milt Josefsberg .....	58
Chapter Four: Seaman Jacobs and Fred S. Fox .....	67
Notes .....	91
Vita .....	97

## INTRODUCTION

From the beginning, television has been a writer's medium. [1] Stephen J. Cannell, Larry David, Norman Lear, Linda Bloodworth-Thomason, Susan Harris, Steven Bochco, and David Milch are to television what Martin Scorsese, Steven Spielberg, and Francis Ford Coppola are to film. As the longtime television writer Milt Josefsberg once put it, "To attempt an analysis of the Jack Benny broadcasts without devoting some space to his writers would be akin to reciting the story of Noah without mentioning his ark. These writers were an important part of this long-shining beacon in broadcasting. Perhaps we weren't quite as important to the success of the show as Jack thought we were, and we certainly weren't as important as we thought we were, but on a scale of one to ten we registered nine." [2]

Josefsberg, Larry Rhine, Sydney Zelinka, and the team of Seaman Jacobs and Fred S. Fox — the five writers interviewed here (the conversations took place in the fall of 1976) — were prominent members of the first generation of television writers, working with pioneers like Benny, Jackie Gleason, Red Skelton, Bob Hope, Lucille Ball, and Herb Gardner.

Rhine, Josefsberg, Jacobs and Fox were interviewed in their comfortable offices at Tandem Productions in Los Angeles. Zelinka, who was semi-retired, was interviewed at the kitchen table of his apartment in New York City. All of them were amenable to lengthy discussions of their careers and their writing. [3] After all, they all were storytellers who enjoyed their work, and talking about it — and they were not often asked to do so. Their names occasionally appeared in trade publications like *Variety*, but their careers long preceded magazines like *Entertainment Weekly* and websites like *IMBD.com*, which put a new focus on television writers and directors.

All of them worked in periods of television history in which they were overshadowed by stars, such as Gleason, Skelton, Hope and Ball, and, later, by producers like Norman Lear. Lear himself was a writer, and his success and prominence, including magazine covers and frequent television interviews, ushered in the era of the celebrated writer-

producer, the medium's answer to film's auteurs: Steven Bochco of "Hill Street Blues," Stephen J. Cannell of "The Rockford Files," Susan Harris of "Soap," Danny Arnold of "Barney Miller," Edward Zwick and Marshall Herskovitz of "thirtysomething," Larry David of "Seinfeld" and "Curb Your Enthusiasm," David Chase of "The Sopranos," David Simon of "The Wire," to name some of the best-known.

The writers interviewed here were not necessarily anonymous, but they were not in the spotlight either; they were largely overshadowed by those they worked for.

All of them began writing for television in an era that is best-described as star-driven (ensemble shows dominate the current television schedule) and ended their careers before writers themselves enjoyed high profiles. But all of them made the transition to situation comedies that were not dependent on outsize personalities but were defined by the situations that gave the genre its name and, later, by their willingness and enthusiasm to deal with topics that television had assiduously avoided. That evolution is at the heart of these interviews; unlike stars who did not retain their popularity or prime-time presence into the 1970s, the writers interviewed had a unique perspective on how the form changed, for better and for worse. It was not always easy; it was demanding work, and it could be stressful.

Television's early sketch-comedy years have been warmly recalled in movies like "My Favorite Year" in 1982 and television shows like "The Dick Van Dyke Show," which ran on CBS from 1961 to 1966. Both featured writers who worked on shows modeled on Sid Caesar's "Your Show of Shows," which appeared on NBC from 1950 to 1954. But whereas the antics of sketch star Alan Brady on "Dick Van Dyke" were played for laughs, the reality was not always amusing.

By all accounts, including Larry Rhine's, Skelton was a mercurial and insecure boss who made his writers unhappy; Ball enjoyed a good reputation among writers but could be cutting to Josefsberg.

For Rhine and Josefsberg, the Lear years were better times; both of them thrived in the system Lear established, which emphasized collaboration between writers and the

cast — and which involved a team, or group, approach to writing. That Lear himself was a writer, and that he clearly had great regard for those who wrote for him, made the experience a rewarding one. For both of them, working for Lear was a dramatically different experience than their tenures with Skelton and Ball. For Jacobs and Fox, however, the layers of rewriting on Lear’s show were frustrating; they much preferred the autonomy given them by Ball and George Burns. Alone among the writers interviewed here, only Zelinka seemed largely reconciled to the reality of a moody boss; he worked for Gleason for years, strategically avoiding him at times, but also socializing with him after hours.

Their methods of writing differed. Zelinka, Fox and Jacobs almost always worked on scripts with partners. Rhine and Josefsberg worked both individually and in partnership with other comedy writers.

The writers interviewed here were confident, opinionated, brash, quick — embodying the qualities that seem essential for dealing with conflict and for collaboration, and for writing enduring comedy.

These were among the writers who built the foundation of television comedy, and their history of how it was built offers rich insight into why American viewers continue to love the form, and new appreciation for what it took to be a pioneer in the medium.

Their backgrounds had many similarities. Josefsberg and Jacobs began their entertainment business careers as press agents; Rhine and Zelinka wrote briefly—but only briefly—for Hollywood movie studios. Three of them attended college (Rhine and Fox at the University of California at Berkeley, Jacobs at Syracuse University). All were men (few women were in television comedy writing in this era, with Madelyn Pugh Davis and Selma Diamond most notable among them).

All of them, logically enough, worked extensively in radio, which preceded television as the dominant entertainment medium. They then made transition to television sketch comedy programs, a natural segue from radio comedy, and then wrote for ‘50s and ‘60s situation comedies (including Gleason’s “The Honeymooners,” Ball’s “Here’s Lucy” and

“The Lucy Show,” and Gardner’s “Duffy’s Tavern”); most of them went on to write for the socially conscious comedies of the Lear era in the ‘70s, including the producer’s “All in the Family” and “Maude” (they also worked on comedies that bridged those periods, including “Mister Ed,” “F Troop,” and “The Mothers-in-Law”). Their methods of writing differed and often were determined by the stars and producers for whom they worked. Gleason, for whom Zelinka wrote “Honeymooners” scripts, was something of a paranoid boss; being on Hope’s staff, as were Rhine, Josefsberg, Jacobs and Fox, was a happier experience. So was working for Ball, who gave writers—including Josefsberg, Rhine, Jacobs, and Fox—significant autonomy. Rhine enjoyed the collaborative, group-writing, and rewriting approach of Lear on “All in the Family” and other shows like “Maude.” Jacobs and Fox did not. Zelinka, Fox, and Jacobs almost always worked on scripts with partners. Rhine and Josefsberg worked both individually and in partnership with other comedy writers.

In the years that followed the establishment of television as the pre-eminent source of entertainment in the United States and other countries, a lively debate has occurred about the origins — and satisfactions — of the television situation comedy. The shows are funny. They are popular. But what, exactly, are they? Are they visual successors to radio comedies? More densely plotted vaudeville playlets? Much of the discussion of the form revolves around one critic’s assertions about what situation comedy is not.

What television comedy is not, David Grote has argued, is traditional “Menandrine comedy,” citing Northrop Frye’s description: “What normally happens is that a young man wants a woman, that his desire is resisted by some opposition, usually paternal, and that near the end of the play, some twist in the plot enables the hero to have his will.” [4]

According to Grote in *The End of Comedy: The Sit-Com and the Comedic Tradition*, Menander, the Athenian dramatist, and his contemporaries “established a comedy in which boy meets girl and somehow they overcome the obstacles that prevent their getting together, so that at the end, boy gets girl. It is a cliché, the ‘happy ending.’ It was and is



not just a plot but The Plot of comedy. Since Menander, all comedic works of noticeable length have used essentially the same plot.” [5]

And it is a plot that Grote considers of enormous value:

Implicit in its simplest statements is a dedication to change and progress, in people, in society, and in the species. Because this change is so important, because the union of the right lovers is so critical, anything may be called in as a weapon to aid them. The most cherished persons and institutions of the society may be attacked, ridiculed, and even physically destroyed, especially those centered around property and bourgeois respectability, which must be altered, ever so slightly sometimes yet nonetheless altered, to be readmitted into a new and, one hopes, better society of the future. Film and stage together, for more than two thousand years, have shared this dedication through the plot and heroes of the comedy. American television... has suddenly and completely rejected it. [6]

Grote writes that he is well aware that television cannot pursue what he regards as the traditional happy ending with every episode — “not only would the audience soon be bored, but the shows would soon have no place to go with their stories and would soon have to be canceled” —but he also contends that because it doesn’t adhere to traditional comedy plotting, the situation comedy “also resists all change of any kind.” [7]

Films, he says, “found new variations that continued the plots and impulses of the traditional comedy,” but television developed and relied upon a different sort of comedy that did not use a traditional plot. “Not only does boy not pursue and capture girl,” Grote says, “he does not pursue anything. The principal fundamental situation of the situation comedy is that things do not change.” [8]

He says that like it is a bad thing, but others disagree with Grote’s criticism of what he considers the static, ever-non-changing nature of the situation comedy. Even if television comedy did not adhere to the traditional plot, it certainly was built on the hallmarks of the comedy writing that came in the centuries before it. Michael V. Tueth argues that:

the characters and plots of television comedy come from a venerable literary tradition as well. Lucy and Ethel, Ralph Kramden and Ed Norton, and Laverne and Shirley can trace their roots to the scheming servants of Roman New Comedy. Homer Simpson, Archie Bunker, and Ted Baxter are all variations of the

archetypal buffoon....Comedy borrows images and tropes from more serious literature and culture as well....Finally, comedy is fundamentally religious, elevating the human spirit above the burdens and fears of day-to-day existence, confronting life's demons and exorcising them, celebrating human virtues and foibles, and sometimes even managing to reconcile differences and inspire forgiveness of human vice and folly. [9]

And Lisa Heilbronn asks, "What if the situation comedy is not a new version of the stage play? What if it is a variation on a different sort of humor, the humor found on the American vaudeville and variety stage?" [10] The situation comedy, she suggests, is like an expanded vaudeville sketch, which was "not designed to display a dramatic unity, but to provoke laughter, sustain it, and get off." [11] The other precursor was, of course, radio, which itself owed a large debt to vaudeville.

As David Marc says in *Comic Visions*, "Radio sitcoms — less glamorous and, more important, less fantastic than movies — established disembodied families as vital illusions enduring and recurring right in the home on a week-to-week basis. Following the technological frontier, the radio sitcom migrated to television — lock, stock, and station wagon — during the fifties." [12]

"My Favorite Husband," starring Lucille Ball, was one of those radio sitcoms, and producer Jess Oppenheimer regarded it as a pioneer, explaining that "we just weren't what was then considered the 'in' kind of radio show, where you have a series of comedy characters, each of whom comes in, does his own shtick, and then exits. Instead, we did whole stories — situation comedy." [13]

It was the kind of format that allowed and embraced a wide range of humor and approaches to comedy, humor that could consistently reflect and comment on its time.

John Hartley, in *The Television Genre Book*, says:

the situation has always been a simple and repeatable frame on which to hang all manner of gags, one-liners, warm moments, physical comedy an ideological conflicts.

In fact, one could say that it has been the ideological flexibility of the sitcom that has accounted for its longevity. The sitcom has been the perfect format for

illustrating current ideological conflicts while entertaining an audience. What if, for example, a family of hillbillies struck oil and moved to the richest community in the USA? What if a working-class bigot had to live with a leftist son-in-law? [14]

Though the shows these writers worked for would seem on many levels to be dissimilar, there were common themes, undercurrents, and veins of comedy, in particular those of class (“The Honeymooners,” “All in the Family”) and gender (“The Honeymooners,” the “Lucy” shows, and “All in the Family”).

None of the television-comedy writers here discussed these subjects at length. Until the 1970s, these were not general topics of conversation in the industry, and comedians typically are loath to overanalyze humor or indulge in lengthy discourses on what is funny and what is not. Yet the currents that ran through these series help explain why so many of these writers were adept at shows that touched even subconsciously on these themes. They were well-versed in contentious characters and comic conflict. High-volume arguments were the hallmarks of much of the humor in these comedies, and in many instances the arguments were about money or the lack thereof.

As Mary Beth Haralovich put it: “A major portion of the comedy of ‘The Honeymooners’ (1955-56) working-class urban family is derived from Ralph and Alice Kramden’s continual struggle with outmoded appliances, their lower-class taste, and the economic blocks to achieving an easy assimilation into the middle class through home ownership and the acquisition of consumer goods...” [15] In the center ring of these shows — specifically, “The Honeymooners” with Ralph Kramden and “All in the Family” with Archie Bunker— was a blustery blue-collar main character, always male [16]— “an inept bumbler and even a buffoon,” in the words of Richard Butsch.

Situation comedy is built around a humorous “situation” which is resolved during the half hour. In working-class series the character typically caught in the situation, usually of his own making, was the man. Usually his wife had to help him out of the situation....Humor was built around some variant of working-class man’s stereotypic ineptitude, immaturity, stupidity, lack of good sense or emotional outburst, traits that have been culturally defined as feminine or child-

like. This character type of the urban working-class male has supplanted the country bumpkin in our panoply of cultural types. [17]

It was a type, Grote has written, that has deep roots in theatrical tradition: “The comic presentation of a strongly opinionated man whose attitudes could be so easily contradicted by factual information taps into some of the most classical satire of the theatrical tradition, readily found in the works of Aristophanes, Plautus, Shakespeare, Moliere, Sheridan, and Shaw. Especially as the show [“All in the Family”] continued from season to season, Archie resembled more and more the stock comic figure of the foolish and tyrannical parent of classical comedy....”[18]

Gender conflict and roles were other constants (and not entirely unrelated to the role of class), another wellspring of comedy in shows from “The Honeymooners” to “I Love Lucy” to “All in the Family.” Virginia Wright Wexman makes the connection between the two forms of conflict: “If ‘The Honeymooners’ aggressively raised the issue of class...it was also notably overt in its representation of gender conflict, for the ideal of class privilege inherent in Gleason’s idea of living like a king was largely dependent on his ability to dominate women.”[19]

But Alice Kramden was not one to be dominated, as Wexman explains: “The measured and deliberate style embodied by Alice offers an image of feminine empowerment that is seen as a realistic alternative to the absurd postures of the men. The Honeymooners is not in a position to resolve this tension, but through its contrasting performance styles it is able to represent alternative frameworks through which various aspects of the dilemma can be expressed.” [20]

Edith Bunker, Archie’s wife on “All in the Family,” evolved in the course of that series to exhibit a different kind of strength, as Sean Campbell concluded: “As the feminist movement progressed throughout the 1970s, Edith Bunker’s independence grew. Edith became a liberated woman who led by example. She did not picket; she did not scream. She may not have worked most of the time, but ‘All in the Family’ proved that not all housewives were subdued by their husbands.” [21]

Lucy was, not surprisingly, a different, more complex story than Alice and Edith. Butsch has contended that the Lucy of “‘I Love Lucy’ — and her various reincarnations, ‘Here’s Lucy,’ etc. — was the singular example of the woman as buffoon, with her husband as the mature, sensible and patient one. Lucy reversed the gender roles of ‘Riley’ and ‘The Honeymooners.’” [22]

But Patricia Mellencamp proposes a more nuanced interpretation of Lucy’s character in what she describes as her attempt to “revive Lucy for feminism.” The title character is throughout “I Love Lucy” a victim, and yet she vigorously fights against that: “Lucy is, finally, rebelliously incarcerated within situation comedy’s domestic regime and mise-en-scene, acutely frustrated, trying to escape via the ‘comic of movement,’ while cheerfully cracking jokes along the way to her own unmasking or capture.” [23]

Writers created television comedy around and through these characters and clashes while working in charged environments ruled by dynamic, in some cases combustible, personalities, notably Gleason, Ball, and the producer Lear. The writers interviewed here started out in show business before there was television. Three of them had worked at humor magazines (Josefsberg in high school, Jacobs and Rhine in college). Two of them began as press agents (Josefsberg and Jacobs), two of them (Fox and Rhine) went directly from college to radio, and Zelinka briefly wrote for movies in Hollywood before moving into radio fulltime. All six writers worked extensively in radio, the mass entertainment medium of the late 1940s and early ‘50s: Jacobs for Fred Allen and Ed Wynn; Zelinka for Jack Oakie; Josefsberg, Rhine, Jacobs, and Fox for Bob Hope (an entry on the resumes of many comedy writers); Josefsberg for Benny.

The move to television was, for all of them, a natural one, as the stars, their employers, gravitated to the new visual medium, which quickly transitioned from live dramas and anthology series to continuing series with recurring characters, anchored by popular comedians and actors [24]. Josefsberg went to television with Benny; Jacobs, with Wynn; Zelinka wrote for Chico Marx; Rhine and Fox both wrote for the series “The Adventures of Tugboat Annie.” While writing for television was a logical progression,

the demanding stars they wrote for — Skelton, Gleason, Ball, most notable among them — had different ways of dealing with those who worked for them. Zelinka knew Gleason was tough; his agent warned him away from the job. But Zelinka understood that Gleason gave writers great freedom, though they were exhausted when the year was over: “Working for Gleason? Toward the end of the season? Climbing the walls. It was very tense. You know, they don’t pay you for nothing. They pay you a lot of money, but it’s because there aren’t many people who can do it.” [25]

While Zelinka enjoyed working for Gleason (he wrote for him for years), his warm feelings about his boss seem to be an exception. In his 1992 Gleason biography *The Great One*, William A. Henry III recounted the experience of Coleman Jacoby and Arnie Rosen, who had a tough time during their one year with Gleason.

Every week he would glance through the script and say with a contemptuous wave of his hand, “There’s nothing there.” After the show, when at least some of the sketches had worked as written, and often worked rather well, Gleason would give them the benediction of faint praise, followed immediately by a fearful, accusatory question about what they could come up with for the next week. Gleason enjoyed playing mind games. “We were sitting one day,” Jacoby recalls, trying to figure out a technical problem — a plot moment, a bit of business, something about how to end a sketch. Suddenly Jackie yelled out, “I got it.” Then he got this strange look and said, “But writing is your job, so I’m not going to tell you.” And he didn’t. [26]

Skelton was also frustrating, for almost the opposite reason, according to Rhine.

Skelton used to change stuff on the set, which used to drive us crazy because in the middle of a sketch he would leave a character. He would rather adlib one line than do 100 lines beautifully and get very good laughs out of it. It was an ego trip with him... There’s a conflict with variety artists particularly and that is that they are thought of as funny people in themselves, as characters, and therefore they dislike attributing any of it to writers who put words into their mouths. So they are continually trying to indicate that they are making it up as they go along.... And in Skelton’s case it was detrimental to his performance because he was so interested in indicating that he was making something up on the spur of the moment that it destroyed whatever else he was doing. [27]

Fox's experience was much the same. "Red Skelton on many occasions — we'd sit there with the writers and we'd write a new sketch and think it was pretty good — and it was pretty good. And Skelton would come in there and before you know it, he'd have changed the thing and he has old jokes in there," Fox told me. [28]

"Through the head writer somebody would say, 'For chrissake, Red, why didn't you try the new material?' He'd say, 'Look, these are old jokes to us, but there's a new generation coming up every four or five years. They never heard these jokes. And these jokes are proven, tried and true. Give them to them again. They never heard them before. To the audience they're brand- new.'"

Ball was also a commanding presence, but her involvement in the material began earlier in the writing process: "Lucy had control over the stories and the development. She was very close to that," Rhine said [29], and she established a template that would be followed by producers decades later.

It was not always pleasant for writers like Josefsberg, as Coyne Sanders and Tim Gilbert write in *Desilu: The Story of Lucille Ball and Desi Arnaz*:

Lucille's millions derived from the sale of Desilu and the elimination of multiple studio responsibilities only intensified her focus upon the final season of 'The Lucy Show'....[At] one early Monday morning script conference...Lucy stopped when she reached page twelve and complained to head writer Milt Josefsberg, "That's awfully radio. It's just radio exposition! I kept hoping there'd be a joke coming up, not a lot of words!" Turning to Josefsberg, she barked, "Let's go! Don't just sit there with your chin on your expensive hand!"...At a later session, she emptied ashtrays and told her head writer, "No, Milt, that precious joke of yours is going out." When Josefsberg hastily reminded her that he had four other jokes to read to her as possible substitutes, she brusquely snapped, "There's no time now — you can give them to me for Christmas. You never know what to give me. Now don't worry, fellas. I'll simply *do* something." [30]

Yet Jacobs and Fox found her easy to work for. "What we liked about her is that she respected everyone's positions," Jacobs said. "When she hired people, she thought they were the best. That's why she hired them... The beautiful thing, she would never change a script unless she talked to the writers first," Fox said. Those scripts, Fox said, were

filled with straightforward humor: “If you’re a good writer, you should be able to get laughs, even when you’re doing the so-called exposition. You should still have a chuckle or two. We would try never to have a page without a couple of laughs on it.” [31]

As the medium changed over its first decades — fewer big-noise, outsized-personality vehicles, more pointed and topical comedies — so did the approach to writing humor. The 1970s comedies of Bud Yorkin and Norman Lear — “All in the Family,” “Maude,” “The Jeffersons,” “Sanford and Son,” and “Good Times” among them — were dramatically different from those that came before, necessitating a new writing style, according to Rhine.

You avoid trying to get a laugh with every other line because you set up a rhythm. And whenever you set up a rhythm it’s bad. Laugh/line/laugh/line—and you just can’t do that. Sometimes you get a roll on a show where the audience is laughing at almost everything but that shouldn’t be the rhythm that you set. If the audience wants to set it up that’s alright. No, if you break the rhythm and also if you do have—especially on “All in the Family” we have had some very serious moments. We had a man drop dead on the show, the watchmaker. Mel and I wrote that show, Mel Tolkin. And it was a very chilling ending and people loved it. We went right straight from the comedy into this dark tragedy, which is life itself and that is one of the things that Norman Lear innovated. Which is to treat life as it is. [32]

The writing process changed along with the subjects at the heart of many popular series, and the Lear comedies represented a sharp break with a more casual, more autonomous era for writers. That was for the worse, Jacobs and Fox contended. “They used to have producers and directors and sometimes they’d have a head story writer, but now they’ve got script editors and story consultants and they’ve got a much bigger staff, and the Norman Lear operation — they keep rewriting,” Jacobs told me. “At the present time, though, you go in and you have to pitch stories and then they finally pick a story,” Fox said. “And then you write it — I mean, after it’s been blocked out — and just arbitrarily they will rewrite it. Because Norman Lear told us that he goes on the theory that each television show is a small play. And so he says, ‘We want to try that play out in the small provinces first, before we bring it to New York.’ “So they will have a thing



rewritten, for chrissake, 10 times. And I say that there is certainly more than one way to tell a story. You can go two or three approaches or even four. But I think that constant rewrite loses some of the original spontaneity and feeling of it.” [33]

As *Time* magazine reported it in 1972,

No shows on TV are more heavily rewritten than Yorkin and Lear’s. Whether a script originates with their staff or is one of the 60 percent that come from freelancers, Yorkin and Lear usually see that it gets torn to pieces. The story line acquires new twists, the dialogue is recast, sometimes new characters are added. When a writer says, “I’d like to see Edith Bunker in menopause,” I know we can peel back layers of Edith and Archie,” says Lear. “When I hear an idea like that, I’m like a dog hanging on to a bone. I’ll hang on forever until the show is right.” One of [the 1972] season’s early “Family” episodes, about Archie’s infatuation with the brassy wife of an old Air Force buddy, was conceived in June 1971. After eight major rewrites, it was scheduled for taping last February. Lear withdrew it at the last minute for more work when it was already in rehearsal. By the time it was finally taped this summer, everybody had had a crack at it, including the actors. [34]

Rhine thought the new, collaborative approach—writers included—qualified as an advance.

In “All in the Family” it’s quite a different thing because when we write we turn in a script and then we sit around a table and we work as equals because the actors there are quite creative and there is mutual respect.... And we pitch and they pitch and the best of each goes into the show. What they don’t recognize, and I don’t think anyone will recognize it who isn’t a writer, is that it is very difficult to do surgery on yourself. And when you have worked on a script, when you have walked up and down the room and maybe spent half an hour on a line and honed it down to what you think it should be, and then you have to go somewhere and substitute for your own lines. It’s a very difficult thing to do. It would be like asking a dress designer to put his dress on a model, and then to take the front and the back, and to take the sleeves and lengthen them and so forth. Once you make your peace with that you are able to work that way. [35]

In the chapters that follow, Zelinka, Rhine, Josefsberg, and Jacobs and Fox offer an oral history encompassing the very beginnings of the medium and their differing approaches to creating jokes and situations as the form evolved through the years. The interviews have been condensed to eliminate some irrelevant tangents or asides spoken to

coworkers entering a room or office; the words appear in the order the writers spoke them. The writers here offer a vivid and detailed portrait of the earliest days of the United States's most popular entertainment medium and the personalities—from performers to producers—who shaped it. Most of them also were actively writing during what was perhaps broadcast television's greatest period of transformation, the era of bold and topical comedy represented by such series as "All in the Family" and "Maude." In the years since the writers here stopped working in television, comedies on broadcast and especially cable have had far fewer restraints on content than in the Lear era — "The Simpsons," "Seinfeld," and "South Park" being three particularly notable examples — but the form itself has not dramatically changed. The writers interviewed here and their contemporaries essentially created television from earlier media—the situations, the structure, and the pacing of the situation comedy that have now become reassuringly familiar. It is why an episode of "Sgt. Bilko" or "The Honeymooners" holds its own against a "Seinfeld" or "Scrubs." What has changed is the profile of the people who write for television. As television has become ever-more popular, as the viewing hours have increased, the audience has paid more attention to those who write the shows they love; if contemporary television writers are not stars, they are certainly more celebrated than ever, and they owe a large debt to the first generation who worked so hard to create the laughs that, to audiences, always seemed to come so easily.

## CHAPTER ONE: SYDNEY ZELINKA

Sydney Zelinka wrote “The \$99,000 Answer.” He had a long list of impressive comedy credits — the Phil Silvers series known as “Sergeant Bilko” (1955-59, CBS), “The Jerry Lewis Show” (1963, ABC), “Car 54, Where Are You?” (1963-61, NBC), “The Mothers-in-Law” (1967-69, NBC) — but it was his work on the Jackie Gleason series “The Honeymooners” that brought him the most recognition, as generations grew up on late-night reruns of the show. The “\$99,000” episode, written with Leonard Stern, won a Writers Guild award in 1956.

Zelinka wrote more than a dozen “Honeymooners” scripts (only 39 episodes were made, for the 1955-56 season) and had a long creative association with Gleason, including writing for CBS’s “The Jackie Gleason Show” in the 1950s and for that network’s “Jackie Gleason’s American Scene Magazine” in 1962.[1]

Born on November 2, 1906, Zelinka grew up in New York City and worked in radio as a writer for “Jack Oakie’s College” as well as comedy for Groucho Marx, Sid Caesar, and Jimmy Durante.[2] He also worked in vaudeville and in movies with the Marx Brothers (he wrote dialogue for the 1947 Groucho vehicle *Copacabana*.)

After writing for Gleason in the 1950s, Zelinka joined “The Phil Silvers Show” (known as “Sergeant Bilko” in syndication and alternatively as “You’ll Never Get Rich”). He and other writers shared an Emmy Award in 1958 for comedy writing for that series, which Nat Hiken produced. He and A.J. Russell, another “Honeymooners” veteran, won a 1958 Writers Guild Award for a “Phil Silvers” script.

He went on to write for Hiken’s “Car 54,” “Bewitched” (1964-72, ABC), “Get Smart” (1965-70, NBC and CBS), and “The Mothers-in-Law,” produced by Desi Arnaz.

Zelinka died on January 17, 1981.

He was interviewed on September 20, 1976 in New York City.

Zelinka: I was encouraged by Ira Gershwin. He said, 'Go to California and write.' It seemed like a lonesome thing to do. So I proposed to the girl I was going with on a Wednesday, and then we left for California Sunday night.

And we got there. And it's not easy to become a writer. It was during the depth of the Depression in Hollywood. It was 1936. And my wife got a job in a dress shop. And one day I got a call from Universal Studios from E.Y. Harburg.

Real popular. And he wanted to see me. He was a producer. Geez, it was the end of the world to me. That this — how did he call me?

So I took buses and trolley cars and got out there. And I asked him, how come? He said that Leonora Gershwin, that's — she's Ira's wife. She called him from New York and told him that I was a bright young fella. And he wasn't very happy with the studio writers the studio gave him. You know, the people on staff.

And he wanted to do a project; did I have any ideas. And it's often I did have an idea. There was something that appeared in Life that week. It was a project of the government giving land grants in Alaska. And it was a good theme. It wasn't a comedy theme, really.

And he said, 'All right. You're hired.' A hundred and seventy-five a week, which knocked me on my ass. And it was heaven. I'd go home and get ideas and jot them down and then I'd go meet with him and go back and forth. And it was going wonderfully for four weeks, when Carl Laemmle sold the studio. They paid E.Y. Harburg off, and he went to Metro as a songwriter and there I was.

So for the first time that I went to Hollywood, we stayed about ten months and it fell through. And came back to New York, and then a year later I went...I was at a party. And there's a fellow there like out of high school who was producing a radio show with Jack Oakie and Stu Erwin — were the actors on it. It was called "Oakie College" ["Jack Oakie's College," Columbia Broadcasting System, 1936-38]. The first half hour was the Benny Goodman half from another city, and the second half was that. And that was a four-week job. I knew it was going to be a four-week job. But it was great.

And from then on I've been all right. I mean, pretty much without a stop.

But that's how it started that I became a writer.

Q: What was the first television series you worked on?

Oh, I'd hate to mention that one. It was the Chico Marx show ["The College Bowl," ABC, 1950-51].

Q: How long was that on?

Twenty-six weeks. It was the dud of all time. Of all time. It was the very early days. And Chico was terrible. He was the least of all the Marx Brothers. And he had — it was funny — he was known for his memory at cards and gambling and things of that sort, but lines he couldn't remember for the work.

I remember, everything was written all around the set. Everything. It was a drugstore [soda fountain] and on the counter he even had — at the final speech he would say, 'And so, ladies and gentlemen, good night.' He'd read the good night.

But I remember one very funny line that I got off — I was so tired of this, you know this, because it has to kill the performance when you do that.

We were having a production meeting with — about the things that were needed. Props and things. And there was a dog in the plot and the set person asked what kind of dog. I said, "Get a St. Bernard — you can write more on him."

Then, really, it was "The Honeymooners." What happened to me was, I was working, I was making a lot of money and saw the first of the Gleason shows. I was in California. And he was doing these sketches, Reggie Van Gleason, The Poor Soul, and he flipped me. Really.

I thought he was so great. And I called my agent and said, 'I want to work for Gleason.' He said, 'You're out of your mind.' The writers are shuttling back and forth — and he was a pretty crazy man. I guess he still is.

He was hiring, firing, and impossible. So I said, 'All right, I want to go with him.' So he said, 'You know about the money he'll pay you? He won't pay half of what you're making now.'

I said, 'I don't care, I'll gamble on him.' And I did and it worked out.

Q: So you started off writing 10-minute sketches and then...

Yeah. The sketches. The one-hour variety shows. Then at one point after a few years, I was a little bit instrumental in coaxing him into doing the half-hour “Honeymooners.” The awful part of that was, I don’t know if you’re aware, but there was only one season of that. One season. Forty shows. Because his attention span is terrible. And after the first season, which was such a smash...[my ellipses] He said, “There are no more plots. You can’t get anymore plots.” Which was so crazy. Because it’s such a basic show. The people were so real and the problems were so basic, that he could have done it forever, really.

And then he went into the hour show again, and then he went into the hour musical “Honeymooners,” and I quit when that came on, because I didn’t like them at all. I thought they were just shit, really.

And then I did a lot of other things after that. And in between I did a lot of “Bilko” shows. And “Car 54.” I had a lot of fun with that. I did some very good ones for that, which I enjoyed doing. And it’s funny, I go to Ireland a lot. I love Ireland. And I remember in the early ‘60s — I had an Irish caddie who was very silent. And somehow or other he knew what I’d been doing and they show those things over there in reruns, at least.

And he said to me in his brogue, “I like that ‘Car 54.’ You don’t have to think much to enjoy that show.” And I thanked him. It was funny.

And I did some “Sid Caesars” in between there too. And then I went to California and did a lot of, you know, the situation comedy shows. I did some “Get Smart,” and I did, one I enjoyed doing was a show called “The Mothers-in-Law.”

And I did some very good ones for that, which I enjoyed doing. You know, I judge myself harshly. I know if I’m good or not. But these were good shows.

And then I did the Carol Burnett show here in New York for a year. It was called “The Entertainers.” Dom DeLuise was on it. Bob Newhart, DomDeLuise, and the

columnist, what's his name, the guy who's in Washington now? Art Buchwald. And John Davidson was on that.

And then I did "The Jerry Lewis Show" for a year. I got along very well with him. But he's a tasteless guy. He could be so funny. He won't listen, and he ruins everything.

A very important thing with a comic is having guts. Like Groucho Marx and Gleason was that way too. They're not afraid of going a minute without a laugh, but some of them go insane if there isn't a laugh, you know, every second.

And it ruins the sketches completely. Like there's one very simple blackout [3] I wrote for Jerry Lewis. It was a real lowdown burlesque blackout of a group of men dressed very swell with morning pants and Prince Albert coats. And there's a stand in the center with a great big diamond in it, and they ring for the cutter.

And the way I saw this, absolutely straight. And the cutter was going to be Jerry Lewis — he is in there waiting for them. And he comes in with an assistant with a satchel and he was dressed that way too. And he comes in, he's in a hurry because he has to be in Amsterdam that night to have another diamond and all that kind of stuff.

And he takes the temperature of the room, the dust content, all that. And they get ready. And they're all standing around. And [he] hits the diamond and everybody's pants fall down, which was terribly funny, but so unexpected. That's the last thing — everybody's pants fell. Blackout. You see?

Well, the way he did it, he came in with eyeglasses this thick, so as to show he's nearsighted, which had nothing to do with the comedy in this. He had a thick German accent, and the thick glasses, and it got a roar at the end in spite of it. He couldn't hurt that, you know? But it was so no-class; it was all wrong.

It should have been played absolutely straight. Straight. You know, the play's funnier that way. But some comics haven't got the guts for that. See?

And it's true of Gleason. I've known him a lot of years. He's a very gutsy comic. He didn't care what jokes Art Carney got. Because Art Carney was a nothing before that

show. And he really built him. If he had been with another comic, if Carney had been with a [Milton] Berle or a Jerry Lewis, you'd never have heard of him. Really.

But he always said — well, I used to ask him at times, I'd be writing a scene and he'd ask how it was going and I'd say, "All right, but Carney's getting more jokes." He'd say, "All right, let him have it."

So it was years later, we met in Sardi's one night and I was with my wife and he was with a girl, and we sat together and we drank and ate and all that. And I asked him about that incident. I said, "How about the time I came to you and asked you, I said, 'Carney's getting all the jokes' and you said, 'Let him have it.' I said, 'Isn't that strange.'"

He said, "No. When you walk out on the stage, if you don't know you're the star, then fuck it." A great line. Great line. Great line.

Q: When you worked on these, were you part of a staff or were you — ?

You're under contract in those days. You see, it was better in those days because there was more cohesion. Because it was the same group writing all the time. And you see, now, like on some situation shows I've worked, you do a separate show, you don't build anything in the character like in "The Honeymooners."

I introduced a meeting place for them....[my ellipses] Now if this had been other writers, they'd have dropped the pool room altogether. And we see the pool room works and you put it in next week. Or if you've got an actor you like, you say, "Bring him back again." And now it's all written from separate places. Like on "The Mothers-in-Law," the head writers were very good. I forget their names. They had done "The Lucy Show." A fella and girl team. [Bob] Carroll [Jr.] and [Madelyn Pugh] Davis. And they, I say, kind of appreciated me. And they grabbed me and had me write [several of them] in a row, so there was some kind of continuity and building of character. But it was too late, because it was like the last year of the show. And they had a deal for me. If this show had been picked up that time, I would have written almost all of the last year.

But that's all gone now. Really. All gone. Agents run the business and these production companies and all they do, the big thing is to do pilots. If they get a pilot



done, this is like a big victory. Even if the show doesn't go on. I know guys out there who are talented that work for some of these outfits and they come in from California and they call me. And I say, "What are you doing?" "I'm in the pilot business. Five this year."

You know? And then if the pilot — if it goes on, the chances are it'll run 13 weeks.

There's really no fun. There's no fun in the work. And that's a very, very integral part of it. Really. We used to have fun doing "[The] Honeymooners." And we used to talk like the characters. Always.

I mean, when I was working for Groucho, I was always Groucho-ing. You can't help it. But that's a thing of the past.

Q: When you were working on things like "The Honeymooners," how many writers were there on staff?

There were — there were three teams of two each. I worked with Leonard Stern on that.

Q: Did you — like all six of you get together at any points?

No, not really. We did sometimes. We'd be together every day and talk about it, but not too much.

Your outline is very important, because you have to know that every scene in the plot can be a comedy scene or you're dead. You can't have one scene that isn't a comedy scene, because I've had it happen where you start a show, you start to write and you find one scene just can't be made a comedy scene with any sense, you know. And you have to start over.

So, he had faith in us, Gleason. We'd come and tell him an idea, a sketchy idea, you know, beginning, middle, and end, and he'd say, "OK." And you went and wrote it.

That was it. You told him the idea and you went and wrote it and that went on. Never anything else. It was right under the gun and everything. What he would shoot on Saturday night with the audience was usually finished on Friday, really.

Q: Was there a rehearsal?

With Gleason it was entirely crazy. Gleason did not rehearse. He had a mind — he could look at the script at noon and do it that night. And then not even go through it — run through it.

Even on the hour variety show he would work that way. It got everybody crazy but him. The others thought he wouldn't know it. And he did.

Q: Was there a favorite of yours to work on, that you liked better than any other?

I'd say "The Honeymooners," basically. Yeah. I got the most satisfaction. Every Saturday night was like an opening night to me. It was exciting. Very exciting.

Q: Let's say you introduced a pool room — would the other writers pick up on that too?

They'd see the show. And the next time Carney and Gleason meet they'd have them meet in the pool room.

And suddenly there's a neighbor upstairs who you use, an Italian woman. Mrs. Manicotti. You bring her down for a bit and it's funny. Somebody else would remember and they'd use her. You know, yelling from the window down to them, some such thing.

Q: Do you think that comedy in the days when you wrote, let's say, "The Honeymooners" or the "Bilko" shows, [was] better than what we have now?

I think it's insurmountably better. Because, I'll tell you why — the people who are enjoying it are not enjoying them through nostalgia, because in order to have nostalgia you have to live through it and these kids didn't. So it is sheer enjoyment. They like it because it's good. I mean, they're not longing for the good old days or anything.

I've got a theory, that whatever's good is good. You know, you see something lousy and say, "Well, in its time it was good." That's bullshit to me. Never!

It goes for plays, for literature, for comedians, for actors, for actresses. Like movies — I'm kind of a movie buff — I used to go to the Museum of Modern Art and see all the pictures. I saw Sarah Bernhardt. And these films were made — you know, they're ancient, in the 1890s they were made in France. And she stank. She was terrible and I've

read things: you know, George Bernard Shaw thought she was the worst actress in the world.

But then I saw something — one of the real early things. It was a little scene, no dialogue, naturally, of Duse, Eleonora Duse. A little scene with her son. She knocked you out. And it was primitive, it was primitive. But you could tell she was a great actress.

If it's funny, it's funny now. Have you ever read Stephen Leacock? A very funny writer. You know, where you pick up a book and laugh. He was a Canadian math teacher. Wonderful, wonderful — and it stands up.

It was Fred Allen who was really a comedy genius. I never worked with him. But we're very good friends. And he said, "There's no place for a comic to go and be lousy anymore." So what they do is they have to start in a mediocre vein. They can't go all out and they don't have the training. Jesus! The Marx Brothers, what they went through. They went with their mother on freight trains. You know, they would jump freights. And they would get off in a little town where they didn't have any booking, nothing, and she'd plant them in the station and she'd go to the [American Legion] hall and the Elks and try to get them \$8 for the night. And it's all over. I mean, like, a guy is as good as his joke. Now, you can't put for me Woody Allen in a class with a W.C. Fields or a Chaplin or a Groucho Marx. You know, he's a one-dimensional character who relies on the comedy of belittling himself all the time. That's all. That's all.

I'm bored stiff by it. I've known him a long time. He used to hang around the writers' room when we were doing "Sid Caesar," trying to break in. And I admire him for what he's done. And Mel Brooks I worked with on "Sid Caesar" and he's a terribly funny fella. Outrageously funny. But I don't think he can write. Like the western thing he did [*Blazing Saddles*, 1974]. I thought that was a crock, really. You know, the end falls apart. Nothing happens. And I can't see the reason for the farting scenes and...[my ellipses] That's so easy. It's so cheap to me. I can't admire it. I can't admire it.

But he was best...[my ellipses] for Sid Caesar sketches, where Sid Caesar sat with us and edited everything.

The year I worked for Sid Caesar we did, I think, six specials for U.S. Steel. And the regular staff was Sid, Mel Brooks, and myself. We used to write together. Sid was a very inventive guy. Crazy, but inventive. I enjoyed it. But it was wild.

Q: Do you watch any of the situation comedies on TV?

Very few.

Q: Are there any you like?

Not really. Like “All in the Family” the thing I object to is that mother who’s the closest thing to a moron there is. I object to it. There’s no reason for her being a third-class moron. And him actually disliking her. The one thing about “The Honeymooners,” you always felt [Ralph] loved Alice and the louder he yelled, the more you knew he was yelling at himself, really. When he was making a schmuck out of himself, that’s when he yelled.

Q: My favorite show of yours [of “The Honeymooners”] is the one where the Raccoons voted not to take the wives along. At the end, you really knew they’d miss them if they didn’t go with them.

I won the Guild Award for the quiz show. “The \$99,000 Question” which was a funny show. I got a couple of Emmys, but the Guild Award meant more to me. Because the Guild Award is — it’s on a single script, not the whole show. And it’s best comedy of the year. And it’s judged by writers. All writers.

And I won it two years in a row. I won it one year for “The Honeymooners” and the next year for “Bilko.” The “Bilko” show — I forget which one it was. I think it was “Papa Bilko.” [4] Where he was a soldier in France with the wig on and this French girl came in.

The [“Honeymooners”] show I loved was the one where Norton gets hurt and that one thing he did there, when he goes to give him a transfusion and Norton is standing there, and he goes right on the stretcher. [5]

And another one I loved, I just happened to see it last week, the tail end of it, I was watching the news and I switched to this and saw the end of the show — where he lied,

he said he owned the bus company. And when the check came he says, "I'll pay," and the other guy says, "All right." And he stared for a full minute. Now that takes guts. He stared for a full minute without saying a word.

That was one of the greatest takes I've ever seen. Wonderful. [6]

Q: When you were young, let's say, in high school — did you ever want to be a comedy writer?

Not necessarily. I enjoyed comedy very much. I was a vaudeville fan. I knew all the acts by heart. I knew the Marx Brothers, I knew W.C. Fields, Fred Allen — you know, everybody. In vaudeville, when you live in New York, your neighborhood had a Keith house [7] and you'd go see the Marx Brothers.

But then they moved to other Keith houses. And I used to follow them all around the city. And I was crazy about Jimmy Durante. One of the first thrills I ever had was in radio. I wrote the Durante/Garry Moore Show. We were a very big success with that show. It was a very successful show.

Q: Who did you learn the most from when you saw vaudeville? Would you say the Marx Brothers were your favorites?

It wasn't to learn, but the Marx Brothers were a great favorite of mine. I loved Jimmy Durante when I was a kid. He says, "What's that out there?" "I see land!" He says, "No, that's the horizon." "Well, let's pull for that, it's better than nothing." It was wonderful. Wonderful talent.

I think the best medium was radio. It was left to your own imagination. You could go anywhere, do anything. I've got some records of stuff I wrote for Groucho in radio that's just great. You could picture a whole stage. I think that comedy is best on radio and mystery is without a doubt much better on radio. To see them, you know, all the mystery is gone immediately. Anything eerie is dead. There were some wonderful ones on radio in the old days. Arch Oboler things and things like that.

And another important thing is the supporting actors. You could get the best because you didn't care how they looked. You could get a girl who could play the beauty, who could be as ugly as sin, but if her voice was sweet, you could do it.

Q: When you wrote for "The Honeymooners" or "Bilko," did you write for the faces as you saw them?

Sure.

Q: Did you have any problem when they moved from radio to TV? Was there anything difficult for you?

Not much. Because I had worked in pictures a little bit. My part of it was — the writing wasn't so tough, but the production was tough. And it was live. You know, Jesus, this — I remember one Gleason show — we used to do it in a theater on 52nd Street and Broadway. The CBS theater. And there was another CBS theater down the block.

And this was live with a full audience and you're going — suddenly — you worked on two microphones. One microphone went out. And what they had to go through. The characters moved over to this one and one of the grips ran down the street and came back with another. It was a big boom mike. About ten feet tall. So he put it there and we went on.

And great things happened. Like Carney and Gleason — you could depend upon them. "The Honeymooners" was done in 30 minutes. There was no stopping if you made a mistake. It was a certain process that's gone now.

There was one scene where Carney was supposed to come in — come in the door. And Ralph says, "Come in." And the door shakes and he can't open the door. And Gleason shouts, "For God's sake would you come in?" And there's a moment of silence and there's a window there. Suddenly Carney comes through the window. "I tell you, Ralph, there's more than one way to skin a cat." And now that's gone.

It was great. But you had to have thinking people to do it. And Gleason, he had the greatest ad lib I ever heard. See, I don't admire ad libs that are from memory, like Berle does and people like that.

But [in an episode Ralph and Norton] were on a park bench once eating their lunch at lunch hour, and Gleason got into a coughing fit from cigarettes. A horrible cough for about a minute. It was like his lungs were coming out. And when he came out of it — you see, the standard line for that...[my ellipses] Carney would say, “I got to get a room tonight” or something like that. You know?

So he comes out of this cough and says, “That Alice, she got to sleep with the windows open.” Well, that was a brilliant line reading, because it’s in context. It’s in character. It’s something that could happen. That’s the story of my life.

Q: What makes good comedy? Was there something that you always knew would get a laugh?

I think the important thing in comedy, just like anything else, is really honesty. “The Honeymooners” was a very honest show. There weren’t any false jokes in it that went out of character. I can’t knock the Lucy show, it’s a very successful show. I know it’s complete farce. But I never did a thing where the guy’s wife blackens two teeth and he doesn’t know her. You know? Really. It’s bullshit. The thing has to be honest to me.

Q: What was it like working for the “Bilko” show? Was it basically the [same] set-up as with “The Honeymooners”?

Yeah. It was a group of writers. I never saw the others, really. But A.J. Russell and I wrote them. And we just sat and wrote. They rented an office for us downtown of 51st Street.

Q: Was it easier for you to write with somebody else?

For comedy it was. It was a big psychological thing with me. Remember the show “That Girl”? A friend of mine, Jerry Davis, produced it. And I was in Hollywood and I had seen it. I had a good idea for a script for that and I went to Jerry. And [I] told him this idea and, geez, he loved it.

It was for good money and I got this idea, it was a very nice idea. And [I] told Jerry over lunch and he, knowing me all through our careers, he said, “Who are you going to write it with?” And I said, “I’m going to write it alone.” And it sounded like somebody

else said it, really. It really was a fearful moment. I had never written alone except once. “The Jimmy Durante Show.”

It was the outbreak of World War II and my partner was called for his physical. I had gotten mine. I was turned down because I had had an appendix operation that went bad. I had gone to enlist, as a matter of fact. But then I was turned down because of this.

And this partner of mine went and they kept him on Governor’s Island. He had something wrong with his stomach. And they took him to hold him for a few days.

I sat down to write that show, which was one joke upon joke and I had to do it like in two days. And it turned out to be a good show.

But this one — this was comparatively recently. This was in the ‘60s. I said, “I’m going to write it alone.” And I sat down and I wrote it, and it was just a — really, it was a forbidding thing. Because it’s very good writing comedy with somebody. You bounce back and forth. You keep it alive. It’s a very lonesome thing, writing. And comedy especially. Because you have to answer to every line. You know, if they laugh or don’t.

Q: In all of “The Honeymooners” shows and some of the others, there were several moments of sadness, when you felt really bad. Do you think that it’s important to vary the pace?

If you were doing a one-shot show, it may go all hilarious. But if it’s going to run, they have to be people whom you relate to. And people have sad moments. Like the ending every week, “Baby, you’re the greatest!” That used to kill people.

He really bared himself. You know, this big, blustering, stupid son of a bitch, would be himself for a minute. And it killed everybody. As a matter of fact, I know people who would always know if it was my show, because it had a little bit of heart in it. Even in “Bilko” I had a little of that.

Q: Toody and Muldoon in “Car 54” and Carney and Gleason. Do you think it’s important to have two people...?



Well, of course, because, you see, you've got to have somebody in any setup who can deliver a line. More important than delivering the line, there's a reaction to it by the other person.

Q: I thought [it] was interesting that in "The Honeymooners" there were four basic people.

Really three. Art Carney's wife [Trixie, played by Joyce Randolph] was kind of... We used to write around her. Gleason was — he knew she was lousy. But he was superstitious about getting rid of her because we started with her. It was superstitious. It wasn't kindness, believe me. That it wasn't. It was a superstition. And also ego too. But Audrey [Meadows, who played Alice Kramden] was great. Great. She was like a rock. She knew every line of everybody's script. Whenever anything happened, she was there, bang. She was awfully good.

Q: Do you ever watch "The Honeymooners" shows now?

Once in a while. And I'm very divorced from it. I can look at it very objectively. Because I forget things in it. And I enjoy it. You know, I saw one last week, the one in the restaurant, where he gets the check. [8] I laughed like I hadn't written it.

Q: How many situation comedies would you say you've written for TV?

Sixty, seventy.

Q: Did you ever get tired of it?

You get tired of everything. Oh, Jesus! Working for Gleason? Toward the end of the season? Climbing the walls. It was very tense. You know, they don't pay you for nothing. They pay you a lot of money, but it's because there aren't many people who can do it.

Q: [Did] you ever [feel] restricted by TV and did you ever want to go longer, say, than a half-hour?

No. I kind of accepted that. And I liked — in comedy I like tightness. As a matter of fact, it's the toughest kind of writing, is to make it short when you have a plot. It was also funny when you added plot — a counter plot. A beginning, a middle, and end. And it was

only about twenty-six minutes of show. That's all when you count the commercials and all that. It was difficult fitting it in.

But it's funny, I have kind of a clock mind. I seldom had to cut after I finished a script. It was like a jockey knows how fast he's going on the horse. You know, they have a stopwatch in their guys. And the same in writing in my case. I know how far I'm going with each scene...[my ellipses]

Q: Were there ideas that you [got] from [real-life] incidents?

Well, from some old wives' tales I got things. Like I did a show for "[The] Mothers-in-Law" based on that thing — it's an old wives' tale about — it's an idea that a crook will send you theater tickets, just in an envelope, and that night he'll go and rob your house. See? [9]

I did that for them. [footnote details here] Where they got the tickets and they're tickled. It's like the biggest show on Broadway, the play. And the neighbor says, "You're not going to that show, are you?" "Why not?" "Because it's the oldest trick in the world, you know?"

"What do you mean?" And she says, "Some crook sends the tickets, you're going to go out, and he robs the house. But I'll tell you what, you'd better stay home. But it's a shame to let the tickets go to waste, we'll go."

And they go, after they've gone, and [the husband is] basically seeing the show, and what's-her-name, Eve, is saying, "Well, what he says is logical. I've heard of that too," she says. And it's true. There's no name there [with the tickets], nothing.

About twenty minutes after they've gone, they get a phone call from a friend. "Did you get the tickets?" So he says, "I mailed them out but I did intend to write a note."

Well, they go to the theater and they try to get their seats back, you know? They have a terrible, terrible time. They get thrown out of the theater for creating an annoyance, and they're fighting with the people around them. And they won't get up from their seats. "Get away. Usher, get these people away." And it's this terrible, terrible fuss.

And then [they] come home, and the couple, our couple, Eve Arden and her husband, come into the house and he says, “Turn on the news.” And she walks over and says, “The television is gone.” [Laughter]

There had been burglars in the house, which had nothing to do with the tickets. And then the other couple come running in and say, “We were robbed.” And they were both robbed, and it wound up with them all laughing at themselves, which is a perfect ending for that.

It was a good show. It was a very good show. And I got that strictly from that thing of people sending tickets and robbing and built that around it. At least it was a starting point. I’ve got quite a few shows, you know, sort of from a reality. And they always turn out very good.

## CHAPTER TWO: LARRY RHINE

Larry Rhine wrote for a long list of well-regarded shows and stars — “Duffy’s Tavern” (radio 1941-51, syndicated television 1954), Bob Hope, Red Skelton, Lucille Ball’s “Here’s Lucy” (1968-74, CBS), and “All in the Family” (1971-79, CBS). But what was perhaps most impressive about his career as a comedy writer was its duration (he wrote scripts for shows in the 1950s, ‘60s, ‘70s, and ‘80s) and its breadth. The roster above was complemented by “The Adventures of Tugboat Annie” (1957, syndicated), “Private Secretary” with Ann Sothorn (1953-7, CBS), “Bachelor Father” with John Forsythe (1957-62, ABC), “Mister Ed” (1961-66, syndication then CBS), the animated “Speed Buggy” (1973-75, CBS), and “The Brady Bunch” (1969-74, ABC)— he cowrote the episode in which Marcia famously broke her nose.

Rhine was born in San Francisco on May 26, 1910. He attended Lowell High School there and graduated from the University of California at Berkeley.[1]

He began his writing career in radio at KGB in San Diego; was a screenwriter for movies, including the 1941 comedy *Six Lessons from Madame LaZonga*; and had a long tenure with Ed Gardner’s radio and television series “Duffy’s Tavern.” (The television version of the long-running show lasted only one season.) Rhine met his wife, the actress Hazel Shermet, on the program; she had the role of Miss Duffy, Duffy’s daughter.[2]

In the 1950s, he wrote for “Tugboat Annie” and “The Gale Storm Show,” also known as “Oh Susanna” (1956-60, CBS); in the ‘60s, for “Bachelor Father,” “The Tom Ewell Show” (1960-61, CBS), “The Red Skelton Hour” (1953-70, CBS), “Mister Ed” (for head writer Lou Derman), and Bob Hope specials on NBC.

In the ‘70s he was a staff writer on “Here’s Lucy” (Milt Josefsberg was the head writer), “The Brady Bunch” and “The Odd Couple” (1970-75, ABC) and he became a staff writer for “All in the Family,” often partnered with Mel Tolkin (and also with Milt

Josefsberg and Lou Derman). In the 1980-81 season, he wrote for “Sanford,” the “Sanford and Son” spin-off on NBC.

In 1978, Rhine and Tolkin won both a Writers Guild Award and a Humanitas Prize for their hourlong “All in the Family” script “Archie Gets the Business.”

He died on Oct. 27, 2000.

He was interviewed on October 19, 1976.

Rhine: When I went to college, I went to the University of California in Berkeley, and I majored in English literature. I wrote a column in the *Daily Californian* with book reviews and show reviews, and I was on the editorial staff of the *Pelican* which was the humorous magazine at Cal, and I wrote funny stuff for the magazine. And I also was on the varsity debating team because I wasn't an athlete and I wanted to do something for the school. So I had a fraternity brother who graduated a few years ahead of me, and he went down to KGB, which was a Columbia station in San Diego and became manager. And he always was able to cut costs in whatever venture he went into. That's why he was so successful in management. So he found out they were paying announcers, and they also were paying writers so he figured if he got a writer/announcer for the same money he could save. So he remembered that I had been on the varsity debating team so he knew I could talk. And I had done these writing activities so he knew I could write. So he called me and as soon as I got out of college I went right down to KGB — for two years — and I was a writer/announcer.

And there was another young announcer there, and they fired him to make room for me and there he was — Art Linkletter. So after about six weeks they found a way to bring Art back, and Art wrote and announced and I wrote and announced.

After two years at KGB the manager went back to New York and got in touch with me and said, "Larry, there's a great future for writing," and he said, "I'm second or third man in station relations at CBS." Herb Ackerberg was head of the thing at the time. And Ed Murrow was very big in the newscasting so I went back to New York. In fact I contacted Murrow to see if I could go to Europe with him, but I didn't know two foreign languages so he took some other big name like Eric Sevareid or someone like that...

Q: Were you writing news at KGB?

No, I was writing comedy. Writing comedy and also we had to write dramatic stuff. For example, we did a thing for the gas and electric company — they called it "Public Enemies." Public enemies were the microbes, and we patterned it after the "Microbe

Hunters,” and I wrote dramatic stuff [about] Joseph Lister and Louis Pasteur and people like that. We dramatized their discoveries and that was a little on the serious side. But I did a thing called “The Bath Mat Revue,” which was some crazy stuff and not unlike some of the corn that you hear nowadays. I’d say we were doing that back in the KGB days.

So when I went back east...[my ellipses] I wrote for “The Ford Symphony Hour.” [3] They had Alec Templeton, the blind pianist; Richard Benelli, the operatic baritone; and Frank Crumit of the old vaudeville team of Crumit and Sanderson.

I got kicked around pretty good in the East but a lot of writers’ contacts are made not so much through agents or knocking at doors but through knowing people — who know what you do. There was a songwriter named Phil Charig who came out later and was at Hal Roach Studios, a good friend of Cary Grant’s. And he would go to a party — I was at a party at his home — and they were all New Yorkers. And I was very much out of it so I sulked a bit and went into a side room where there was a piano and I got a book out and put it up on the piano. So Phil came in and he said, “Well, I see you’re not enjoying the party.” I said, “No. It’s a very good book.” He said, “Well, these are New Yorkers. They’re not interested in anyone who is not from New York. But, what do you do?” So I told him I wrote comedy and he said, “Well, a very good friend of mine, Ben Bernie, “The Old Maestro,” is looking for a writer.”

So the next morning I was on Central Park West and Bernie was up on the roof garden in swimming trunks. It was a very hot day, and his wife was in a swimsuit and he had this little dog on his shoulder and he was turning the hose on his wife and she was turning the hose on him. And he was still smoking a cigar, even with the hose turned on, and he said, “Larry, my boy, I’ll make you a deal. You’ll work for me for six weeks. If you make it and you learn my style you’ll stay with me forever. If not, we’ll shake hands and part friends.”

That was one of the nicest things said to me and I was with him for about six years. But he brought me back to the coast. He was doing a picture with Winchell and so I

worked weekly on the picture and then I stayed out here to work in the studios and he went back East. And I worked in the movie studios. I worked for Universal and Twentieth Century Fox doing B pictures, which mercifully have been forgotten.

After that I was called up to San Francisco to work in the Office of War Information by the same man who was the manager of the radio station, and I finally wound up in charge of all the Philippine broadcasts from the United States to the Philippine Islands and I was chief of the Philippine bureau for the entire war. [4] And I had 18 hours a day on the air that I personally was responsible for and I had 30 news writers and commentary writers and translators working for me. I supervised the writing, I did some of the announcing, and at the end of the war I came back to Hollywood to make money again. And I worked briefly on “The Life of Riley.”

With William Bendix. I think Jackie Gleason did the first one. Yeah, this was Bill Bendix and John Brown was Gillis, and David O’Dell the family undertaker. So this was radio and we’d come way down to “Duffy’s Tavern.” [The writer] Bob Schiller was with Ed Gardner at a bar one night, and Ed was hiring people right and left. Someone would crack a joke and Gardner would say, “Hey, you could be my writer.” So he got himself in very big trouble and this was, you know, the number 1, 2, 3 show of its time — “Duffy’s Tavern.” So Schiller said, “I’ve got a big switch for you, Ed. For a writer, why don’t you hire a writer instead of these trumpet players in bars?” So Ed said, “Well, who the hell is the writer?” and Schiller said, “Larry Rhine.” So Gardner said, “Who the hell is he?” So the next day I’m over with Gardner and we got along very well together. I happen to get along with people like that. Especially the males. I got along great with Ed Gardner, just as I do with Carroll O’Connor. I think there’s a chemistry there that is based on mutual respect and also a personal respect, not only professional.

So I was with Gardner for many years and he made a tax deal to go down to Puerto Rico on a deal called the Puerto Rican Economic Development Act, which was Operation Bootstrap in which the Puerto Rican government made a deal with our government to bring industry to the island. So Gardner, who always had an eye out for a buck, brought



the show down to San Juan for two years. And my wife came down to do Miss Duffy, and she wasn't my wife at the time, Hazel Shermet. So she came down to do Miss Duffy. She was unmarried, I was unmarried. So I found a wife through my work and I wound up in Puerto Rico. So we taped the show in Puerto Rico for two years and sent it up to New York. And when the show wasn't picked up, then I came back here. And then I started picking up some of these other shows. "Private Secretary" — I wrote those alone for Jack Chertok for General Service. Ann Sothern was the secretary.

Jack Chertok, who produced it, had been a big producer at MGM. He was the first one who went in for an in-depth study of his characters. He wanted to know where his characters came from, what was their background, the kind of people they were. And that became very important in the writing to avoid what we call surface writing of paper characters where you don't know who the characters are, you don't know how they talked, you don't know what their frame of reference is, you don't know what their background is, you don't know what motivates them.

Q: What would you say would be an example of a paper character from a past TV show or one that's on now?

Well, I'd say "The Brady Bunch" and I worked on "The Brady Bunch." I wrote those shows. There were six kids and two parents and a maid. And the six kids were interchangeable. At times one kid would get sick so you would just take the lines and give them to one of the other kids. It doesn't seem to make any difference. And of course with six kids it's very difficult to develop any kind of characteristic anyway, other than the fact that one is younger than the other.

We had a situation on "The Tom Ewell Show," which was quite a good show, although it didn't become as well known as some of the others. Ewell was a real estate man. Tom Potter lived in the Valley in the show and he was an island of a man surrounded by a sea of women. He had three girls and a wife and a mother-in-law. Tom's relationship with writers was great because he would say to us, "Look, I can't write this. I don't know how to write but if you can give me a certain attitude when I walk on the set

in this scene, when I walk into the room, I could do a much better job than the way you have written it now.” So that was fine because it didn’t tie us down to anything specific because it is very difficult when you get tied down to specifics.

What I mean by that is, for example, Bob Hope would require us not only to write his specials exclusive by contract but also to write his appearances — his public appearances — his breakfasts, lunches, dinners, at all the clubs, beauty contests, bar mitzvahs. We even had to write material for his daughter’s wedding. So what he did was he went out and got a big professional music writer, paid him a bucket, and then said to us, “Now we want you fellows to write two or three.” Well, we weren’t songwriters and competing with the big ones so we would do takeoffs and songs, and it’s difficult to do a good one anyway. We would do it and Bob would say, “I don’t like the fourth or fifth line” while you were tied to a rhyme scheme and you were tied into a rhythm and a tempo and everything else and it was a very difficult thing to do.

So, getting back to what I was saying, Tom Ewell — anyone ties you down and says it has to be specifically this — it makes it rather difficult.

Q: With “Private Secretary,” what were some of the characteristics or the background you developed?

It was an unnatural situation that you couldn’t have nowadays because here was an attractive woman working for an attractive boss and there was never any sex, never any love or anything else between them. And it was a very unnatural kind of relationship. She was a little step above Lucy, who was a secretary to her boss. The secretary and boss relationship has always been — that goes back to what I was saying before because that’s a family relationship in that it’s either a father and a daughter, or a husband and a wife relationship.

Q: It has been said that in regard to the Mary Tyler Moore Productions [shows] whether or not people are related, they are all families. Mary Tyler Moore was a daughter, and the boss...[my ellipses]

This has a subliminal effect on people because the family relationships are the basic relationships. For example, Captain Huxley on “Oh, Susannah was very definitely the father. He was the gruff authority. Gale Storm with her little cute looks and her little dark eyes that darted back and forth, she was the little girl — the daddy’s little girl. And Nugie, who was Zasu Pitts, was the mother. And the mother would caution, the father would bellow, and the little girl would do her little girl tricks and get caught. And of course it was on a ship, and she was the social director on a ship. The ship was the home. The people, without tabbing it or defining it the way I’m doing here, would recognize a genuine relationship.

Q: Can you think of any successful comedy show that did not have a family, a basic family unit?

Gleason, of course, had the family....the Skelton characters didn’t have that because they went into sketch, which further demonstrates the fact that when you have a situation show which refers to a real life situation, that’s different from a sketch. Sid Caesar doesn’t have to have that because he just came on and did sketch stuff. But I should say that when it didn’t have it that’s where you get into big problems. You see, on “Mary Tyler Moore,” Ed Asner is definitely the father in this group. You have to knock on the door, and they have to cater to his whims, and yes sir and no sir, he punishes them, and they’re like a bunch of kids out there.

Q: When you worked on “Private Secretary,” did you write by yourself or did you have a partner?

“Private Secretary” I wrote by myself. I’ve written by myself. I’ve written with a team of two and I’ve written in a room with five or six and it all works. It all works one way or another. No two shows are written exactly the same. I’ve never known two shows to have the same writing situation.

Q: On “Private Secretary,” did you write most of the scripts?

No, I didn’t. I probably wrote six or eight of the shows. I was young in the business then and it was a big credit for me and I worked well with that.

This was freelancing. I had no contract. I had to get a story approved in order to do a teleplay and that is what is going on nowadays with freelancers. They go around from show to show, have to sell a story idea in order to get a teleplay. I lamented the situation because I didn't feel that a person should have to put in a lot of time on somebody else's show without any kind of guarantee that they would be able to make a dollar out of the thing because it's for business.

Q: Did you ever have any problems getting into a character on any of the shows you wrote for?

No, not really, because I've been blessed with a pretty good ear and if you hear your characters you can write them. Now, in "All in the Family," Edith has a very definite sound, Archie has a very definite sound, Mike and Gloria have. And when people from outside turn things in, they're so jarring, they're so off the characters and you know they think they're on the characters, you know immediately that they have no feeling for these characters. When we work at the table and I pitch a line to Carroll, if he likes it invariably he'll take my word, and invariably, if I have a line that I've written 20 years before, 10 years before, 15 years before, and I want to use it — it would be word for word the way it was written originally because there was a rhythm — rhythm to lines — where a syllable will throw a line out. And if you have an ear, you're very fortunate and also if you have an eye you're very fortunate. And as you see we have sets out there and we continually refer to our sets. We want to know where our people are, where they make their entrances and exits, where if you want them to overhear something where they are when they're overhearing it. You just want to know the physical layout of it.

On the Skelton show where we did sketches it was very important for the writers to know what special effects and sets would give you, what was required in a particular sketch. So I would draw the set, and I can't draw worth a dime, but I would draw it the way any amateur would draw it, indicating where I wanted the furniture, where I wanted the upstage windows, where I wanted the downstage windows, and the doors and the exits and also where we wanted the wiring because with Skelton everything was always

flying, and you would have to have wiring that wouldn't get in the way of entrances and exits. And of course when the sketch would open there might be a half dozen wires so I would then call the set man down and tell him what I wanted and give him my bad sketch, and he would use that and make a good set design out of it. Then we would get what we wanted. I also worked very closely with special effects on that. On this type of show ["All in the Family"] you don't have to do that because the director takes over and he works out all of these things and you do a minimum of working out the directions and that sort of thing.

Q: When you were working on shows in the '50s were they primarily one-set or two-set shows?

They hadn't [developed] the three-camera technique in the '50s. They just used one camera, and they didn't have a stage that was wider than it was deep, where you could have three or three and a half sets, and they didn't have shooting in continuity. So consequently, like "Mr. Ed" — "Mr. Ed" was shot like a movie, which is one-camera technique. And with one-camera technique you shoot all your kitchen scenes first, you shoot all your living room scenes, you shoot all the porch scenes together, and they're out of continuity, but you do that so you don't have to break the set to move on. When they started with three cameras [and sets in a row] you could move from one set to the other and the other cameras would pick it up.

Q: Did they give you any problem...

Always. There's always a physical problem and a completely different writing. Completely different writing because with three-camera technique, you're stuck with your characters. You have people in the kitchen, you have people in the living room, and you just can't erase them. And you have to have reasons for them leaving, reasons for them coming back, and if they fit in with the plot it's good writing. If they don't fit into the plot, it's bad writing. And sometimes it's just in between the two — it's just convenient writing. Where if you hear him say, "Selma, make coffee," that's convenient writing — to get the girl off.

Q: So there was a definite change when you moved from one camera to three cameras.

Yeah, a completely different technique and you can't use a dissolve. You could only use a dissolve between sets [and scenes]; for example if Archie leaves the living room and is going to Kelsey's, that's the end of the scene. Actually, you would do a dissolve. But the kind of dissolve that you do with a movie technique you can't do. And also you can't do progression shots, where you want to show that someone is taking a cab and then taking a boat and then taking a plane and all that sort of thing. You don't need all that kind of thing because this is a much more intimate — this is almost like in-the-round as compared to the actual stage. Actually, putting those people into a setting of a home — they're mostly homes — or an office. "Lucy" is shot with the three-camera technique. Sometimes they have four cameras, [which] picks up the overall shots. And then on all these three-camera things they later can do pick-ups. So if they don't get a shot the way the director wants it, after everybody leaves they do that shot over and cut it in.

Q: Were there live audiences for you in the '50s on any of those shows?

Well, the one-camera technique — no. "The Tom Ewell Show" was shot on a stage with one camera and no audience. "Oh Susanna" was shot on a stage which had a deck of a ship and cabins; you could pan past the cabins and go on to the deck and it was on a set with no audience.

Q: Does that make a difference to you now that you're writing shows that have audiences, that are taped here?

You're aware of the audience. The actors, of course, have to be more aware of them because the reaction is immediate. There's applause, and all that sort of thing. And a director has to be aware of it. The director sits up there with different shots and the different cameras and he could go from camera one to camera two to camera three, and he could play a symphony there moving from one camera to another. And he can get his reaction shots and so forth. And these are on tape, as contrasted with the film which they used in the movie technique.

On “Duffy’s Tavern,” when we came up here, we shot it at Roach Studio — that also was a movie technique. So I would say largely that the audiences were not developed for the shows in the ‘50s. The audiences before that were for radio. Audiences were very big for radio. They would get the reactions and sometimes they spruce up the laughs with the track.

Q: Did your experiences on “Tugboat Annie” help you write for “Oh Susanna”?

Not really, although they’re related. “Tugboat Annie” was a weird one. Anthony Veiller, whose father, I believe, was a famous New York dramatist, produced these, but they were filmed in Canada and the quality was horrible. It was like they were shot through a dirty window. This was a tugboat and it was completely different because “Oh Susanna” was a passenger ship, and the passenger ship was a beautiful concept because it was a floating city. It had a restaurant, it had elevators, it had a florist shop, it had a clothes shop with sportswear, it had a gym, it had games, it had an engine room, and we used all of those.

We had a fellow from the engine room who had fallen in love with a girl passenger, and Susanna had to get the two of them together. So she borrowed a tuxedo and against all rules brought him up from the engine room to have dinner with the girl. And of course Captain Huxley came over and so she had to introduce the young fellow as being in oil because he was in oil down in the engine room. The captain figured he knew something about Standard of Ohio and Standard of New Jersey and asked him a lot of questions. And the poor kid had to double talk. [5] It shows you how we used every facet, every part of the show. But in addition, the ship could go anywhere we wanted. So it could be in Hong Kong or we could be in Seattle, we could be anywhere we wanted. If we wanted to do a jungle show we were in Africa, some port in Africa.

Q: Did that help you, that freedom to do all those different things?

Yeah, it gave us our plots. We went to Australia, I believe, once and picked up an entertainer. And he was broke and Susanna got him a job entertaining, doing a song and dance on the ship. It was Jack Albertson. It was long ago and so Jack of course had been

a song and dance actor in musicals here before that. But it probably was one of the first TV shows that he had. [6] And now, of course, he's with "Chico and the Man." His sister Mabel Albertson was on "The Tom Ewell Show." She was Tom Ewell's mother-in-law so there are some interesting interrelationships in this business.

Q: Was there ever any problem with you in the 1950s with censorship?

I didn't think so. I think first of all we accepted censorship. I think with certain types of shows, like the variety shows, we would run into Charlie Pettijohn, who used to be at CBS, and he'd be on the Skelton show. He'd say, "You can't say that, you can't say this." But in those days we just accepted it. We didn't fight too hard. The type of thing I was doing would not get on this kind of dangerous ground that Paddy Chayefsky might get into with the more serious drama, where maybe he wanted to do something about pregnancy. In those days that would have been a big no-no. I never felt too inhibited by it.

Q: "All in the Family" is a topical show, whereas people view the shows of the '50s as not so topical. Do you rely, do you think, on the same techniques to get your laughs now as you did then?

No, the topics are a big help. You see, situation comedy, the word situation really was meant that it was a contrast to joke comedy, and in situation comedy a door could open and someone could get a laugh. And in situation comedy you could mention [former Agriculture secretary] Earl Butz and get a laugh without writing a great big joke about it because the people are in on it. They make the reference for you so it helps quite a bit. Of course with Hope it was almost all topical stuff, as it is with Johnny Carson. "All in the Family," a lot of it is not only based upon direct reference, but a lot of it, when you say topicality, is based on the then-going situation.

We're having a series of episodes now on unemployment and dad losing a job has been a perennial favorite on comedies. But right now it has a particular bite because people are aware that when you get to be a certain age there is no getting back into business. You're dealt out. A certain age now is in the 40s, 42 or 43. We had a man



who's about to jump off a ledge who's a college graduate and had been turned down for a janitor's job because he was overqualified and overaged. [7]

Q: Did you ever want to approach any current events in the comedies of the '50s or was that frowned upon or discouraged? Or people just didn't even think about it?

The third thing you said, we just didn't think about it. It didn't come up. And also, because the people were closer to the paper characters that I've talked about. They just didn't have that kind of depth. Susannah would never, we didn't even think of her reading the newspapers or ever being aware of what was going on in the world. She was just a little minx that came in and played tricks and got caught. A little rule breaker. And Lucy, a scatterbrain, would never be thinking of anything. And Gleason and his character, a [bus] driver, we just didn't think of him as being aware of what was going on. Then it became kind of smart to be aware. Johnny Carson's made a whole career of it and so has Hope—their awareness of the very, very up-to-date things.

Q: Did you ever see a shift from your view on comedy year after year, update it, because now you're writing topical shows?

No, I don't think so. I think comedy is basic and I think you use different words but I think the characters are all the same. [Archie Bunker] is a character—a near-illiterate who has very low sightings on the mental scale and tries to get on his tiptoes intellectually—to impress people with his intellect, which he doesn't possess. And you can go all the way back on this to the old vaudeville shows. Potash and Perlmutter, they're the old German dialect comics and with this you got no education. The dumb guy was talking down to what he thought was the dumber guy. I don't think comedy changes that much. I don't think it's changed that much since “Lysistrata” with the very, very basic things that make people laugh.

Q: Like what?

I think seeing someone frustrated, seeing someone dig his own grave, seeing Charlie Chaplin stepping over a manhole and looking at it as he backs up and falls into another one. I think verbally we do the same thing with jokes. Someone said that comedy was the

prolonging of a strained expectation into nothing. [8] The public will follow your straight line and then when you suddenly trick them, they'll laugh at being tricked. So that your basic joke, which we call a straight line—straight line doesn't mean it's a straight line going to the tag line or the funny line. A straight line means it's a straight thought. You know, "What are three apples and three apples?" That's a perfectly legitimate straight line. And the answer is, "I don't know." "Were you...I just went out after school." You see, this is the trick. This is the basis of most of our jokes. I'm at an age now where I don't care if you copy that and take my job away. Now that you know the basis of it you can write jokes. You just write a straight thought and then take a detour.

Q: Was there any favorite show that you've written for? What was your favorite in the '50s?

I think "Duffy's" was because "Duffy's" was quite a literate show. We had college professors and ministers writing in. Now here was a show with an uncouth bartender. I don't know if you ever heard of the show, you're too young. It used to open and there would be a phone ringing and Gardner used to say, "Hello. Duffy's Tavern. Where the elite meet to eat. Archie, the manager speaking. Duffy ain't here. Oh, hello Duffy. Tonight, oh we got..." and he would tell who was coming in tonight and Eddie the waiter would come on.

Whenever you have a comedy show you usually have the voice of reason and the voice of reason always brings the comic down. You don't have to have it; Gleason didn't have it. There was no voice of reason on his show—they were both crazy. And on Duffy it was Eddie the waiter and Clifton Finnegan, who was a moron: "Duh, hello, Arch." And Miss Duffy, who had a nasal twang and could never get a fellow and she waited outside the draft office for the rejects. And then there was Duffy himself and you never heard Duffy. Ed Gardner...was Archie, but you never heard Duffy. But he always talked to him on the phone and he was a very lazy Irishman.

But the tavern would have the most effete of actors and writers as guests on the show. They loved to come on the show. They loved to get slapped around. Opera singer Helen

Traubel was on the show. It got so hysterical we never got her off; the show ran long that time. I think I enjoyed that. It was an epic grammatic show and I've been very proud of some of the lines that I wrote that have been quoted and gotten into books and so forth.

[9]

There's one on opera, Archie was describing opera, that's in the book: "Opera is suffering set to music." "In opera, when a guy is stabbed, instead of bleeding he sings." These were the sort of things that—Clifton Webb, who was a very articulate and well-dressed actor from the old school, came on the show and Archie said, "Well, Clifton, welcome to the tavern. Come on and bloat yourself up with some of our good food. Well, Clifton, what do you think of the place?" And Clifton said, "It looks like looking into the rearview mirror of a garbage truck." "Well, I knew you'd like the place, Clifton. Hey, you really are [a] dressed up fellow. You know you could drop dead and they wouldn't have to touch you." And that last line was the line that's quoted. These are the things that you try to get, and when you do get them it's a great satisfaction.

Q: In your shows do you try to get a laugh with almost every line or do you have moments where it's pretty much straight?

You avoid trying to get a laugh with every other line because you set up a rhythm. And whenever you set up a rhythm it's bad. Laugh/line/laugh/line—and you just can't do that. Sometimes you get a roll on a show where the audience is laughing at almost everything but that shouldn't be the rhythm that you set. If the audience wants to set it up, that's alright. No, if you break the rhythm and also if you do have—especially on "All in the Family" we have had some very serious moments. We had a man drop dead on the show, the watchmaker. Mel and I wrote that show, Mel Tolkin. [10] And it was a very chilling ending and people loved it. We went right straight from the comedy into this dark tragedy, which is life itself and that is one of the things that Norman Lear innovated. Which is to treat life as it is.

Not "Gilligan's Island," where, you know, people are walking around on an island in tuxedos and all that sort of thing. It got by and served its purpose but that's not what

Norman Lear is trying to do. Norman Lear believes that you flush your toilet and you hear it, so you should hear it on the air. [11] And he believes if you diaper a baby, you should diaper the baby and if you're referring to the reasons for re-diapering the baby you also should do that because what could be more basic? Why should you turn away from life as it is?

Q: Do you think the shows you wrote, like "Duffy" or "Oh Susanna," turned away from life or was it a different way of looking at comedy?

I think we turned away from life. I think it was because of the mores of the day. Our language has changed. Our thoughts have changed. You can say things in polite society now that were never said before, and so we were all looking away from the basic life and the basic life functions and so it would just never come up. Susanna and Nugie and Captain Huxley just never went to the toilet, never had sex, and we in our own way probably believed that. The people watching might do these things but not our people. Or Lucy.

So those shows just reflected, as I say, the thinking of the day. So it wasn't inhibited. There was just no reason to go into these things. It just wasn't done. The double-bed concept for married people was required in those days and we just accepted it. You couldn't have two people in a bed. Looking back on it, why couldn't you? It just wasn't done. It wasn't done dramatically or comedically.

Q: Let me ask you about "Mr. Ed" a little bit. How many scripts did you write for that show?

It was over a period of two years.

I think that Ed was one of a kind. I wrote "Ed" with Lou Derman. Now Lou and I got ambitious and we decided that it was not enough just to have Wilbur standing in the stall and talking to Ed. We wanted to really move so we decided to have the CIA becoming a plot by not having the means of figuring out certain crimes that were being committed. And the only one that seemed to be able to figure it out was this not-very-bright guy Wilbur, and they just couldn't figure how he did it. And he always insisted on bringing

his horse along. So they figured that he was just kind of a kook but it didn't make any difference. So, we would have the horse come into an office and look at the evidence, and there would be a glove for evidence.

We would, for example, use the horse's sense of smell, and Lou and I wrote one where he smelled this glove that was used in evidence by the C.I.A. They were trying to track down some international spies. Ed would go out in the middle [of a restaurant] where some of these spies would meet to talk. And they would look around and see if anyone was around and they would talk in front of the horse.

The writers were quite proud of the fact that they were giving Alan Young a tour de force. He was a Chinese waiter, he was an Italian organ grinder, he worked in a lighthouse. And Alan Young for some reason or other hated the idea so we had to abandon it.

Q: What kind of control did the stars have over the material?

Varying, varying control. Lucy had control over the stories and the development. She was very close to that. Skelton used to change stuff on the set, which used to drive us crazy because in the middle of a sketch he would leave a character. He would rather adlib one line than do 100 lines beautifully and get very good laughs out of it. It was an ego trip with him. There's a conflict with variety artists particularly and that is that they are thought of as funny people in themselves, as characters, and therefore they dislike attributing any of it to writers who put words into their mouths. So they are continually trying to indicate that they are making it up as they go along. And it's a terrible conflict because there are writer's credits on the show, and they've been directed through writers.

And in Skelton's case it was detrimental to his performance because he was so interested in indicating that he was making something up on the spur of the moment that it destroyed whatever else he was doing. He also required writers not to be at rehearsals and the main reason being that he would bring in book jokes and adlib them to impress the other actors on the stage and the musicians and the stagehands. And he knew that if

the writers were there we would know which books the jokes came from, so we were not allowed to be there. And, well, he lost a lot by not having writers at rehearsal.

In “All in the Family” it’s quite a different thing because when we write we turn in a script and then we sit around a table and we work as equals because the actors there are quite creative and there is mutual respect. And we pitch and they pitch and the best of each goes into the show. What they don’t recognize, and I don’t think anyone will recognize it who isn’t a writer, is that it is very difficult to do surgery on yourself. And when you have worked on a script, when you have walked up and down the room and maybe spent half an hour on a line and honed it down to what you think it should be, and then you have to go somewhere and substitute for your own lines. It’s a very difficult thing to do. It would be like asking a dress designer to put his dress on a model, and then to take the front and the back, and to take the sleeves and lengthen them and so forth. Once you make your peace with that you are able to work that way. Just yesterday Carroll was talking about writers that are not able to do that and they just can’t work [on] this kind of show.

Q: Do you find that the group approach here, where you get together with people and do rewriting, helps make a better show than if you just turned in a script?

Yes. No question about it. I hate to admit it as a writer, but it is true. Remember this: First of all, an actor is inside of his character. A writer can approach that but you never can get inside the character as an actor can. He’s lived with the character. And they know exactly how the character would say it, they know how he would react to something someone else says, and, also, physical problems come up. Someone would drop something and have to pick it up and you’ll need a line there to cover that or else there is just dead air. And if you haven’t anticipated that in the writing someone will have to put it in. And if it makes sense and if you’re looking for a quality that’s comedic, then you are much better off.

Q: When was the first time you were on staff on a show?

I guess Skelton was staff — staff-written at CBS and we divided up. Artie Phillips and I and Marty Ragaway did [one] sketch and Mort Greene and Dave O'Brien did the silent spot [13], and Bob Orben, who now is in the White House doing speeches for the President, was doing the monologue. And at times we would be called on to do the monologue, at times we would do a silent spot. But largely it was divided up that way and Ed Simmons, who is now head writer and producer of "Carol Burnett," was head writer. And later on Schiller and [Bob] Weiskopf came on as head writers and they would take everything we had and put it together. With Skelton, as you know, he had these characters — Freddy the Freeloader, the Tramp and George Appleby and Clara Appleby, Mr. Milquetoast, Sheriff Deadeye, the Mean Little Kid and — but then you were talking about writing for different characters. Each one of those you had to write differently. And what we would do, we would switch these characters around to suit the guest and we would figure which guest would work best with which of these characters.

And we had a character that we created called Forsooth. Now, Forsooth was a mean and evil character, a little on the swishy side with long red hair and the long stockings and the doublet and all that sort of thing. And so when we had Milton Berle on the show we wanted to put him in a costume like that because we knew he would look crazy and we put him back in the time of the Crusades. [14]

And these were the Bob Hopes of the crusades and they went down to tell jokes to the troops. So we had these crazy troops, you know. In the sketch you put four troops on either side — you got two armies fighting. And there you've got troops ready to hack one another. The fellows would go on out and yell "Freeze" and they would tell the jokes. And then the fellows would turn their swords on Berle and Skelton and hit at them because the joke was so bad. But we would integrate the guests into whatever character we thought they worked best with.

So that was a challenge and it was good writing. And it was staff writing. We were in a suite of offices there.

Q: Were you on staff at "Duffy's Tavern"?

Yeah, Duffy's was staff and that preceded Skelton so I was on staff before that time.

Q: Other than monetary, what kind of difference does that make to a writer, being on staff?

Well, it's for the security. There's a security which is very important in our business. It gives you a feeling of being wanted and conversely it negates that terrible feeling of having to go around with your portfolio in your hand like a salesman trying to sell your work. You're on the outside, and also you have none of the niceties of someone working on staff. We have — all our materials are given [to] us. We have our secretaries. When we work with the staff we meet with the actors twice a week. We have a beautiful buffet and Norman [Lear] gives beautiful parties at Chasen's and all this for the staff. The get-togethers — you get to see other writers and other producers. You're in touch with things, you're in the hub of things. Mel Tolkin and I just won an award from the heart institute [15] and we were invited to go to Miami this week. We can't make it. It wasn't a money prize, but it was more important that we got a citation award because one of our shows was helping instruct people that [being] overweight is bad for the blood pressure. It was called "Archie's Weighty Problem," and he had been putting on weight and we had a show where he did have a blood pressure problem. And unfortunately we used the wrong numbers for the blood pressure and although it was checked out by our research people and so forth, somehow or other it got through wrong. And Norman got a letter from the blood pressure institute.

I think I was using my own and I didn't know it was. So we made up for it. Norman insisted that we make up for it, to his credit. That he's just not putting entertainment on the air but it would be entertainment. He's trying to disseminate something of a kind of social value and what could be of more social value than health? So Norman said that we had better get out another show and make up for that. So we had Archie trying to fight the weight problem and Edith insisting that he'd better watch his diet. [16] And he was cheating all over the place until he met this old man at Kelsey's. The old man said, "If I



didn't look after myself I wouldn't be here now. If you want to go to your grandson's wedding you had better take some weight off."

Q: Do you usually go to the first run-through?

Well, there's a reading on Monday and the writers who have written that show are at the table and we run through it and then we reread it with changes which we're all required to pitch. This is one of the requirements now for a writer on a show like this. You know a lot of people say, "Gee, I could write that show" and so forth. Well, not only in 999 out of 1,000 cases can't they do it but even if they could sit down and pound out something, there is also now an immediacy. You know when they want it now. And if Carroll O'Connor needs a line, you know, no one is going to shoot you if you don't come up with it, but you had better come up with something. It's quite a challenge. With Hope it is a different kind of challenge. Hope has a great system. He never wants material more than a day ahead of time because he has these appearances that he does each day and he doesn't want to be confused. So he'll call you at home or call you at a party. He always knows where you are, and he'll give you the subject and he'll want 30 jokes immediately. If it's Weight Watchers he'll want 30 jokes on Weight Watchers. If it's ballet or an auto show, he'll want 30 jokes on it. But you don't have to leave the party. You can just excuse yourself, go to a back room — you don't even need a typewriter — and scribble out 30 jokes. Then you go to the phone and you call the secretary and she tapes it and types it and gives it to Bob. Then you back to your party. So that's an interesting kind of challenge.

Q: Did you grow up in California? In Berkeley?

I was born in San Francisco and was always interested, even as a child, in writing, which is kind of unusual. When the kids wanted to be firemen or policemen, I always wanted to be a writer. I wrote my first novel, I think, at the age of 6 or 7, and it was a page and a half, rather short. But that's what I wanted to be so I consider myself the most fortunate of all people because that's exactly what I want to do. Particularly in a situation

like this where I'm working with the top writers in the business. It's a very, very gratifying thing and I've just been very fortunate.

Q: Was there a different atmosphere here in the '50s than there is now?

I don't think so. Norman Lear has recognized experience because he has most of the veterans working here. There was quite a desire a few years back, when I guess the hippie era came in, to get the youngsters, you get the hep kids — they knew the language of the day and all that sort of thing. And there was a while there, they just didn't want any of the older writers, but now they've switched around. They realize that experience means an awful lot. Not only experience in writing but experience in knowing and accepting the routines of life.

Q: Was there anybody you knew in situation comedy who was affected by blacklisting?

Yes, Reuben Ship, whom I had worked with on "The Life of Riley." He was quite active in leftist activities. Whether he was a Communist or not I don't know and I don't care, but he was picked up in the middle of the night and shipped off to Canada, and we were shocked. Being a writer he fought back the best he could by writing for a familiar broadcasting system and he wrote a famous anti-McCarthy play. It was something he did on McCarthy and it was McCarthy going to heaven and trying to run heaven the way he had done things down here. And blasting all the people up there. A record was made of it and circulated here in the States; I heard it many times.

Abe Burrows, of course, was in trouble. I had known Abe. Abe was one of the first writers at "Duffy's Tavern" when it started in New York. He was the number one writer on the show. He came in to help us — not to help us, but he just dropped in. And I remember one thing in particular because we were doing bald jokes because Abe was bald. And he said, "Who would believe this? Here I am making jokes against myself." Because when he came on the stage Archie cut him down to ribbons with all the bald jokes that he had participated in writing. So I've worked with some of the writers who were on that.

So that really was the extent of my connection with writers who got in trouble that way. Something that I deplored for so many reasons. One of the reasons was that they happened to just take top writers in order to make headlines, which is really a horrible thing to do. They destroyed some careers. Another writer I know, Robert Lees of the team of Lees and Rinaldo, who wrote the Bob Benchley shorts. They destroyed Leeds. He wound up for a while selling neckties. It was a terrible, terrible era and you ought to be glad it is in the dim past. But I don't think we should ever forget what had happened.

Q: Getting back to the shows, were there favorite actors of the shows you wrote for that you enjoyed because they could deliver lines the way you wrote them? Or did you write them for the character knowing what they could do?

I was very fortunate in writing mostly for top shows and so when you write for top shows you get top performances. With "All in the Family," of course, you've got the top performers in all of history. Skelton was good when he behaved himself but he had a lot of hang-ups that affected the sketches unfavorably but when he was doing his pantomime he was a near genius. Nobody could approach him, perhaps Marcel Marceau, who we had on the show once and we wrote a whole pantomime for the two of them. [17] We wrote an hour pantomime. We did Pinocchio. And one of them did Pinocchio and one of them did the Woodcutter and the whole show was no words spoken. The pantomimes, incidentally, are completely written — every move is written, and the pantomime spot that Skelton used to do on the show was on fifty-eight pages — move by move. He would put in a few extra moves to accommodate the set.

Ed Gardner was a freak as an entertainer because he wasn't an actor and he was thrown by appearing on the stage. He hated an audience. This was radio. He smoked a cigarette, had a hat on backwards and leaned on a bar so that he didn't have to move. When we went to Roach Studio and did a TV show, he never understood the camera. He stood facing it awkwardly and delivered his lines in the camera and never appreciated the film technique. I said to him many times, I said, "Ed, this is really easier than radio because in radio you just have to get laugh after laugh because of the words. Here you

can see a woman walking in the tavern and all you have to do is look at her if she's not good looking and look up at the moosehead and you've got a laugh. You don't have to write anything. This he would never accept. This he never understood. And so as a performer, I certainly couldn't consider him in the same company as...

Lucy was a real trouper and Lucy would do wild things that you wanted her to do. She would insist on doing them. We had Lucy do a — it was supposed to be a freefall from an airplane and we had a mock-up of an airplane on the set. And then after we cut to some stock shots of her floating around in the air, the parachute would open. And we had a set which was the airport with her boss and the two kids looking out the window and saying, "Lucy, be careful. Be careful. Don't come down, you're going to hit the roof." We had her come through the roof. This was onstage before an audience. We said to her, "Lucy, we can do two things. You can have a dummy or we can have a stunt double." She said, "No, I want to do it." So the climax of that show they were saying, "Lucy, be careful. Be careful. You're going to hit the airport. You're going to hit the building." And they cringed and we had a false ceiling — a complete breakaway ceiling — and she came right through that; crashed with the wood flying, and she had a harness on from the parachute and which they stopped up above, and she came down and she stopped this far from the floor and bounced. With dust falling, and with wood falling, and so forth. She crashed through that thing. The audience applauded for a whole minute and she said, "Hello, earthlings. How a flying nun could do this every week I'll never know." And that was the end of the show. She did it herself; she wanted to do it. [18]

So writers have a greater love for performers than the performers ever realize because we work with them, we work for them and in most cases we have a tremendous respect and admiration for them. So when a person's a trooper we appreciate it. When they louse things up because of their own conceits and so forth we don't appreciate it.

Skelton was a far better performer than he wound up as because of his hang-up over material and his desire to portray himself as a man making it up as he went along. It's destroyed Jerry Lewis. Jerry Lewis had a two-hour show and he kept telling people he

was winging it. Well, you can't wing a two-hour show. It can't be done. Groucho Marx used to appear to adlib and he had the idiot board — it was right over the contestants' heads.

Q: Do you think that you're writing for posterity or do you think that you're just writing week for week?

Writing week for week. I every now and then have someone come up at a party. You know, "What motivates you to write?" So I always say, "Hunger." And it always throws them. It's a living. We have 24 million people watching this show [19]. Every now and then, when you're not just carried along from your day-to-day activities, you do a little retrospect. In fact, you've forced me into a little retrospect when you had me go back over my files. The reason I went back, I have these shows bound, is that I didn't think I really could remember shows I have written from the '50 to '65 [period], because I've written so many.

I wrote for Phil Baker, then [on] "The \$64,000 Question." I had a funny thing happen with Phil. It was a Christmas show. The audience was seated on the stage, the overflow audience, because the place was packed. And I had been writing Phil's adlibs just before the show went on because it was a contest show. And the secretary would scribble down what they asked the people when they went up on the stage. And it would say, you know, "I'm a secretary," or "I'm a tailor," or a bartender, and she would hand me these things and I would write quick one-liners so that Phil would put them up on this stand, you see. And so he'd say, "Well, madam, what do you do?" She said, "I'm a secretary." He said, "Well, I had to fire my secretary. She was so thin she kept falling through my lap." People would scream, because it was supposed to be off-the-cuff. And on this Christmas, I was trying to scribble these one-liners and sitting on the secretary's lap because there was no place to sit backstage, and she was bouncing me around so I was late with the adlibs. So Phil said out loud, "Where's Larry with my adlibs?" So the audience broke up, they thought that was the funniest thing they ever heard, figuring it was part of his act. I came out, handed him his adlib; he put them on the thing and nobody believed it.

## CHAPER THREE: MILT JOSEFSBERG

Milt Josefsberg wrote legendary comedy shows and in the process became something of a star himself, with a resume that included “The Jack Benny Show,” “Here’s Lucy” and “The Lucy Show,” and “All in the Family.”

Josefsberg’s 1987 book *Comedy Writing* (he also wrote the book, *The Jack Benny Show*) included the following recollection from longtime television writer and producer Garry Marshall:

I first met Milt in the summer of 1962 when he joined the Joey Bishop situation comedy as head writer and script consultant. I was on staff as a junior writer for the show. Although I was comparatively new in the business, I had heard of Milt because he was already a legend in the industry with his track record of serving 19 years with two of the giants, Jack Benny and Bob Hope. It was the ambition of every budding writer to be on the staff of either of these two great comedians. In fact, in Neil Simon’s “Broadway Bound,” laid in the late 1940s, he has his semi-autobiographical counterpart, an aspiring writer, say he’d like to be like Milt Josefsberg and the other Benny writers. [1]

Milt Josefsberg, born on June 29, 1911, grew up in Brooklyn (he worked on his high school humor magazine, *The Comet*) and later wrote for Hope and Benny both on radio and on television. He worked with Lucille Ball for eight years, creating the format for “Here’s Lucy,” her third series; it ran on CBS from 1968 to 1974. [2]

He joined the staff of “All in the Family” in 1975 and went on to become a producer and head writer (he also had those titles for the first season of “Archie Bunker’s Place,” which succeeded “All in the Family”).

In 1980, he began working with Marshall on “Laverne and Shirley,” “Mork and Mindy,” and “Happy Days.”

In the foreword to *Comedy Writing*, producer Norman Lear observed that Josefsberg “has written every type of comedy known to man — from Bob Hope’s one-liner monologues and sketches to side-splitting ‘Lucy’ slapstick to some of the most serious and controversial ‘All in the Family’ episodes ever aired.” [3]

Josefsberg died on December 14, 1987.

He was interviewed on October 19, 1976, in Los Angeles.

Josefsberg: As a kid in high school, I began writing humorous pieces for the school paper and magazine. Incidentally, the school I went to was called New Utrecht High School. And it's in Brooklyn, and you see it every single week if you watch "Welcome Back, Kotter." They call it Buchanan High School, but that's the school, yeah.

Then I began sending jokes to various columnists, Walter Winchell and Mark Hellinger. They were on the New York papers, and they began printing them and I eventually got a job with a press agency, sum of \$10 per week, and my proudest boast is that after the week was up, he called me in and raised my salary to \$15 a week. Then I became a press agent on my own [in 1933], and I stayed as a press agent for five years, at which time I had various young fellows working for me.

One of them was a fellow named Jack Rose [whom] I eventually got on the Bob Hope show after I was on it. Jack Rose did *A Touch of Class* -- many, many movies -- but he did *A Touch of Class* with Mel Frank, the picture that won the Academy Award with Glenda Jackson.

Jack left, and he was succeeded by a kid named Mel Shavelson. Mel Shavelson came to me and I started him for \$12 a week, and before the week was over, I raised him to \$16, to show I was more generous, at which time a fellow named Bob Hope was going to be on another radio program. Now most people don't realize this, but Bob Hope flopped on five radio programs.

It was my intention to try and land Mr. Hope as a publicity client.

And one of the things I had done earlier for a comic named Ed Lowery who never made it on radio or TV, but tried to, was I would send a weekly humorous letter on a current subject to radio when it was all over the country, and I tried to land Mr. Hope by writing a similar thing.

Mel and I wrote this thing, and I brought it over to Hope's agent and by the time I got back, there was a call from the agent, Jimmy Saphier, James L. Saphier, and he said this is better than any of the material he received for Hope's show, from writers. He was in



charge of the writers, and an interesting sidelight: He wanted me to rewrite it as a monologue. I said, no, present it to Hope as a publicity idea.

Well, Bob read it, and Mel and I signed, and we came out here and worked for Bob for five years in 1938. How it happens, I don't know, but writers who eventually became quite prominent in the business flocked to him during those five years. They included [Norman] Panama and [Mel] Frank. They did many, many movies. [And] Al Schwartz who has written for many, many shows, a great writer, and his brother, Sherwood Schwartz, who created "Gilligan's Island" and "The Brady Bunch."

Anyway, I was with Hope from '38 to '43, at which time I felt like making the change, and I got with Mr. Jack Benny. I stayed with Jack from '43 to 1955 doing radio and eventually television. After 12 years, we had a very, very tearful farewell, and I went on to NBC. I wanted to create TV programs.

I had a hand as an NBC executive in molding several programs that eventually got on the air that were brought in from outside sources, and one of them was "The Real McCoys," which eventually went to CBS. [4]

When I left NBC, I had a couple of odd jobs. A year with Danny Thomas. And then if you ever look at a Writer's Guild annual where it lists all the writers and their credits, it listed me as having 2000 years with Joey Bishop. Because it seemed that way. And I started as script consultant. Was immediately promoted to the producer. And it just became unbearable, but I stayed for a year-and-a-half. It was the only show that I ever walked out on in the middle of a contract. I think by a conservative count, I quit the Bishop show about 120 times. Seventeen times in one week. Incidentally, they paid off my contract.

From there, I almost immediately went to Lucille Ball. I was a script consultant [5], and I stayed with Lucy for eight years. Now Lucy at that time was doing her new series, which was called simply "Lucy." And it was not "I Love Lucy." It had Vivian Vance. She and Vivian played widows who lived together and had children. Not had children together, but they had them by their ex-husbands.

Oh, Vivian was the boss and Lucy was the widow. I started there, the show had been on two years. We went to four years more. And Lucy at that time wanted to change her format and another series, and I created a new series. This was because Vivian had left, and I created a new series which was called "Here's Lucy," which ran for six years — it hasn't sold for reruns yet. I hope it does.

I left Lucy, and I wanted to try writing books and things, and I received several offers that weren't good. I got one of them to work part-time on "The Odd Couple." After about eight weeks, I realized this wasn't going to work out.

And then for a year-and-a-half or so, I did nothing, and then they asked me to come on here ["All in the Family"], and I started just as a writer, which is what I am. "Just as a writer" sounds demeaning but I always considered myself a writer and nothing else. And then at the end of last season, they promoted me to producer.

Q: How was the situation for a writer different in the 1950s than it is for, say, now?

It was easier for a writer to break in, in the days of radio. Let me start back there.

Bob [Hope] told me about his five or six flops. They never lasted more than 26 weeks, which was the -- what they signed you for. Sometimes 39 weeks.

And Bob once said, "Anytime they came to me with an offer for radio, I figured, well, I'm going to have 26 weeks at \$1500 a week." He says, "Of course, I couldn't keep the whole 1500 because I'd have to hire a staff of writers." He says, "That would leave me only 1400." And I began laughing because that showed what a staff of writers received. Now 25 bucks per writer in the early '30s was good. For your information, I started at quite a high salary.

The comedian, therefore, was not averse to hiring a bunch of writers and putting them on. Now if I remember correctly, Jack Douglas started on that show for \$35 a week. I believe the team of Panama and Frank started for \$100 for the team. Other fellows started for \$75. We once figured out a couple of years ago that Hope's original staff of writers cost him under \$700, and at that time, you couldn't possibly hire him for less than \$50,000 per week.

In those days, writers were hired for \$25, \$50 a week. A man could have a team of writers, a stable of eight writers, six or eight writers, and it would cost him \$500. The same is true when "Duffy's Tavern," a radio show, went on the air. They had some great writers including Larry Rhine, Abe Burrows.

On the situation comedy things, now in those days "Jack Benny" was a rather weird program because it was a situation comedy at times where there was a whole story throughout the entire show. At other times, we would just be a variety show doing sketches like Hope and all the other[s]...Fred Allen.

But most of the time we had a thread of a story. But not like the situation comedies of those days which were "Henry Aldrich," "A Date with Judy," and others.

Incidentally, a digression, but this break shows up into what we call hard comedy and soft comedy, and also if I can get ethnic [there is] actually Jewish comedy and gentile comedy. And the most gentile shows that were ever, ever on the air were "Ozzie and Harriet" and "Father Knows Best."

Now gentile comedy and soft comedy, they designated as something that you watched and you sat and you smiled to yourself. Jewish comedy was more to the gut, where you looked at and laughed. And for instance, Lucille Ball, although a gentile, did Jewish comedy. "All in the Family" is Jewish comedy although Archie is supposedly anti-Semitic. Anti-Semitic and five of his writers are Jewish.

Benny, they asked me to classify, and I said I think of Benny as reformed Jewish. Or conservative.

This has nothing to do with chauvinism, ethnicity, or any of those things. It's a classification between hard comedy and soft comedy.

Anyway, when Benny went into television, his initial shows still had part storyline and yet part...he might start with a monologue, which Hope always does. Part variety. Sometimes a show would be all variety. Sometimes a show would be all situation comedy, and sometimes it would start off with variety and the last half would be situation comedy.

One of the things that [Jack] did on television was a thing that we had done on radio. It was based on "Gaslight" [6]. We did this on radio. When television came in, we did the same thing: we took the same thing, and just made it visual, and we filmed it with Barbara Stanwyck playing the Ingrid Bergman role, and Jack playing the Charles Boyer role from the movie.

Situation comedy is usually harder because characters must remain true week after week. This is not so on variety shows where you'd do a sketch where Jack would be a detective or hope to be a detective one week and the following week he played the part of a crook and the following show he can be a barker in a sideshow.

The current crop of comedies are a stickler for realism and how you must realize that Archie Bunker and Edith Bunker [are] in a certain financial position, a certain bracket, and they have to live that way and they have to remain true. They remain true to their characters.

And sometimes we lose jokes because of certain things. We will have a joke and someone will say that only applies to California.

We did the show "The Birth of a Baby," and in that thing, there was a mix-up where Archie and his wife got to the hospital ahead of the daughter who was going to have the baby, and Archie got into a big fight with the nurse and she says, "Perhaps you made a mistake. You've gone to the wrong hospital. You know this is the Presbyterian hospital," and Archie's line was, "I know it ain't the Cedars of Lesbians."

Well, it was a big laugh and then someone pointed out that Archie would not know about the Cedars of Lebanon Hospital. In New York, I contended that he would know about it because it was possibly one of the most famous hospitals in the world, and before I was even in show business, I would read so-and-so had a baby at the Cedars of Lebanon so-and-so. It is the most publicized, possibly with the Menninger and the Mayo Clinic.

But the joke was lost on account of that. There are many other things that... we did a show where Archie got into a business deal with an elderly Jewish man who eventually died in the house and this Jewish man was played beautifully by Jack Gilford. [7] He

immediately sensed that Archie was basically a bigoted man and he made a couple of remarks like that; he had a line, "How do you celebrate Brotherhood Week?" to Archie. And Archie says, "I don't. I'm an only child."

We got about 200 letters from people saying that on...in the second or third year, Archie had a brother. And although he was never seen, this brother's daughter, who was Archie's niece, came to stay with them, and she began dating Lionel, who was the son of the Jeffersons. And they remembered that.

And this is how much of a stickler they are. A joke for the sake of a joke stands absolutely no chance at all.

Q: Is that different with "Lucy," when you were working on that?

Well, with "Lucy," they did not adhere to those things. Lucy worked for Gale Gordon. He was the boss, and anything he did that wasn't cruel or wrong, was permitted. She had two children. I remember when I created the format, I talked to her and I said, "Now, look, Lucy, this is a different generation." Now I would say that was around...I'll say '68. I said, "This is a different generation. You cannot have children like Rick and David on 'The Ozzie and Harriet Show.'" "Yes, mother, dear." You know, everything so completely polite.

She turned to me. She said you're not going to make them snotty bastards are you? And I said, no. But they're going to talk to you the way kids talk to their parents today. And then I wrote the first script and she said, "My God, Milt," she says, "you must have been listening." So I said, "No, I went through having two teenagers of my own."

I remember at one point in the very opening show, Lucy was worried because her daughter didn't show up and kept worrying about it. Her daughter was played by her actual daughter. Her son was played by her actual son. And he's just practicing his drums; he couldn't care less. Kept saying, "Mother, you worry too much." And finally she turned on him and says, "Oh, I worry too much. Just wait till you have children of your own." [8]

And he turns, says, "Children of my own? You won't even let me go steady!"  
Tremendous laugh.

Another example, when the boy was going for his driver's license, we did a show on that, and he wouldn't study his anything. He says he knew it all. And Lucy sort of snapped at him and said, "Look," she says, "when I was up for my driver's license, she says, I took my test perfectly." She says, "I never exceeded the speed limit. I made my right turns and left turns perfectly. I stopped at every light." [9]

And the kid says, "Gee, you must have had a smart horse."

Now, on the Ricky and David show, they rarely if ever took a slap at their...slap is not the right word...I mean verbal. They never had a comeback at their children. Didn't make jokes with their parents. It was all, "Gee, ma, can't I?" Now it has become an entirely different ball of wax.

Q: Was there much censorship when you were working with Benny on TV, or Lucy?

On "The Jack Benny Show," I did a thing where Jack was supposed to pick up a copy of *Playboy*, open it to the centerfold, look at the picture, and I don't remember what he said, but the song was not out at that time. But they in no way would permit us to do this. Then, several years later on "The Lucy Show," I had Gale Gordon pick up a *Playboy*— a copy of *Playboy* — turn it around, open the centerfold, and start to sing "To Dream the Impossible Dream."

On a show that will be on tomorrow night, we have Archie going to the hospital for an operation, and Edith and him in the waiting room, and he's ...Edith begins blathering. She's trying to cheer him up and talking, "Here, read a magazine" and he tries to doze off, and she picks up a magazine and it is *Playgirl*, and she opens the first page and says, "Archie, I don't think I ought to read" ...he says, "Just read."

Now, *Playgirl* has the men's organs, and she does things with that magazine, looking around, turning at every angle, and you know the pictures she's looking at are naked men completely exposed and the audience screamed at the thing. [10] That's how things have changed...

## CHAPTER FOUR: SEAMAN JACOBS AND FRED S. FOX

Seaman Jacobs, born in Kingston, New York, in 1912, went to Syracuse University. Fred S. Fox, born in St. Louis in 1915, went to the University of California at Berkeley.

Jacobs began his career as a Broadway press agent; Fox, as a writer in radio; at one time he had his own children's show on KSFO in San Francisco, called, fittingly enough, "Freddie the Fox." [1]

They had decidedly different beginnings that eventually led to a productive partnership.[2] They both wrote for Bob Hope and Red Skelton. Before becoming a team, Jacobs wrote for such popular series as "The Danny Thomas Show" (also called "Make Room for Daddy"), "Bachelor Father," "F Troop," and "The Andy Griffith Show"[3]; Fox, for "The Many Loves of Dobie Gillis," "The Joey Bishop Show," and "Griffith."

As a team starting in the mid-1960s, Jacobs and Fox wrote for Lucille Ball's "Here's Lucy" (which ran for 144 episodes on CBS from 1968 to 1974), "Diff'rent Strokes" (1978-85 on NBC and 1985-86 on ABC), "The Mothers-in-Law" (1967-69, NBC), and "Maude" (1972-78, CBS). They also wrote specials for George Burns and were among the writers for Burns's 1980 movie *Oh God! Book II*. [4]

Jacobs died on April 8, 2008; Fox on October 23, 2005.

They were interviewed together on October 18, 1976, in Los Angeles.

Jacobs: This is Seaman Jacobs, who is in his sixties now. I come from Kingston, New York, and when I got out of college it was a deathly Depression, so I became a typewriter salesman and beer salesman — which was really what I studied for in college.

[Laughter.] I could type and drink beer at the same time.

So through a remote connection I got a job in New York in 1934 working for a man named Hal Horne. This job — it was in Hollywood. He was a collector of the largest collections of jokes in the world at the time. And the thing I was working for was a sideline. He had a little joke-collecting business and he put out little comic magazines and he started a thing called the Mickey Mouse Magazine. I have the original eight copies, which I hope to see some day. But for \$25 a week I was cutting out jokes and putting jokes in a little Mickey Mouse Magazine.

And he would be the kind of fellow who would have 30 people working for him one week, and four the next. So one of the weeks when we had four and I wasn't one of them, I was looking for work and I answered an ad with a press agent.

And I became a press agent from '36 to '42 and I enjoyed that kind of work and writing for Winchell and meeting the people and getting encouragement. Most of my first contributions were comedy. You know, jokes. At Syracuse University, where I graduated, I had been editor of the college comic magazine, so I really had always pointed toward that, and in a small town like Kingston, New York, you wouldn't be able to write for anything but a local paper or a chain letter to your friends or something.

So I became a press agent during the war years, pre-war wars, and during the war years I spent most of my time at a Brooklyn army base.

My wife, who had been a former client of mine, kind of looked down at press agents and encouraged me to be a radio writer, and this agent got me on "The Fred Allen Show." In fact, I was still in uniform when I was working with Fred Allen. And that was just a tryout and I wasn't really experienced at all and didn't last long, although he was very encouraging and became a good friend.



So I started to be a freelance radio writer and did only so-so because the business was filled with experienced writers. And then through a connection, a friend of mine, I came out to Hollywood and got into radio out here in '47.

The first shows out here that I worked with were “Beulah” and “Bing Crosby,” where I got a thrill out of watching [Crosby] sing with Al Jolson. And I worked with a fellow named Hal Kanter who I had met back in New York. We had done an audition for Harvey Stone [who] was a pretty funny guy when he was in the service, but nothing much happened to him afterwards, because he had his nose fixed and also his comedy, I guess.

Back in New York I worked with a man named Ed Wynn. I was one of the few writers out here and I didn't feel I was equipped to be his head writer so I got Hal Kanter on the job and I got on his staff.

So that was '49, and since then I've been in television and Fred Fox, who I'm working with now, is my third partner — but not my last, because he doesn't want to work as hard as I do.

Fox: Jesus!

Jacobs: It's going to be 10 years, isn't it?

Fox: Yeah.

Jacobs: We started on “Lucy.” It was the last year of the second show. It was the last year of “The Lucy Show.” And then we did six years of “Here's Lucy.” And the last two years we were staff writers, which was a lot better.

But the best job we'll ever have as far as financially is “Red Skelton.” Because he paid his writers very well and in fact one of the troubles was that I think his overhead was so high that they weren't able to continue. They didn't get the money they wanted for commercials. And although the rating was pretty high, economically — he was asking for more money when they wanted him to take less, I think is what happened.

Fox: But, I mean, if he had just been a little reasonable and hadn't asked for the usual yearly raise, the crazy show would probably still be on the air. But, you know, he had that

certain ego that said: “I have to keep getting more money,” and he priced himself off the air.

I went to the University of California in Berkeley and my major was business administration with an accounting sub-major because I had an older cousin I was very fond of, and he said, “Go to college and at least get something practical.” But I really had no idea of writing or anything.

I did a few little articles for our fraternity magazine or paper, which was Sigma Phi, and got out of school and went back to St. Louis to work for my father for a short time. And that didn’t work out too well.

So I came out here and happened to meet, at a party — kind of a wild party — met the manager of a radio station in San Francisco, KYA. So I went to work for station KYA. I was just selling time on the air. And I worked at that job for eight weeks, I think, and I hadn’t sold anything. I didn’t even sell a small commercial. So he said, “I think you should be in the program department.” So I went in the so-called program department, and I started to write little shows and they sort of fell into a comedy vein, and then I went to work for the Columbia Broadcasting station in San Francisco and then other stations and started doing some freelance things. And then the war came and I went with Office of [War] Information, which was sort of a propaganda thing.

I was writing a show for G.I.s and also writing some things which translated into Chinese [laughs] and they’d be broadcast over there on the overseas radio and then...I think it was a very charming girl who said, “Why don’t you sit down, for chrissake, and write some material for some of the comedy shows, and maybe you’ll be able to crack the big time in Hollywood.”

So we sent the material to George Burns and Gracie Allen, and they made me an offer. So I came to Hollywood and wrote for “The Burns and Allen Show” for about five weeks. And of course I didn’t really know what the score was at that time, and after five weeks I was let out. But then I went back to work with “The Jack Carson Show,” I think. It was for Campbell’s Soup — was the sponsor — and that lasted for about 13 weeks, and

they brought in a new producer and a new head writer, and when they used to do that, everybody who was there was out.

Then through a very lucky break I met Bob Hope's agent and [he] said, "Why don't you write some material?" And so I wrote material and went to work for Hope and was with him for five years. And then carried on from there.

And that's a very delightful success story, I think.

Q: Do you two both prefer writing with a partner than by yourself?

Fox: I do.

Jacobs: Yeah.

Fox: You know why, honestly? It's more fun. And you also have someone to get you to work, because it's very easy to goof off, you know, and sharpen pencils and go read the mail and keep away from the typewriter.

Jacobs: And you're each other's critics, too,

Fox: That is for sure.

Jacobs: Of course, you can get plenty of critics in this business.

Fox: But Cy probably hit on the most important thing. I mean, you're sitting alone, you write something you think is pretty funny and then...

Q: When I was talking with Sydney Zelinka in New York, he seemed to think that in the 1950s and early 1960s, writers had more freedom as far as the shows they could do. They could come in with an idea and then somebody would say, "Fine. Go work on it." He didn't think that was the case anymore.

Jacobs: A whole barrage of people [are] changing your material now.

Q: And it wasn't like that before?

Jacobs: No. They used to have producers and directors and sometimes they'd have a head story writer, but now they've got script editors and story consultants, and they've got a much bigger staff, and the Norman Lear operation — they keep rewriting.

Fox: In other words, now it's writing by committee. And I personally don't think it's half as good as the old system. We talk about this pretty often... Say you have a person

like Sheldon Leonard, who knows good stories as we know good stories, because we're pros. And you might have Danny Thomas in the meeting with us. And if four pros can't get a story and then write it, it just seems incredible that that isn't the way shows are written at the present time.

We would certainly, on many occasions, have a little rewrite. In other words, if somebody would say: This scene, wouldn't it be funnier if we used this approach instead of the approach that you use? And sometimes you'd say, "Of course, that's much funnier." Sometimes you'd say, "No, we still think it should go this way."

At the present time, though, you go in and you have to pitch stories and then they finally pick a story. And then you write it, I mean, after it's been blocked out... And just arbitrarily they will rewrite it. Because Norman Lear told us that he goes on the theory that each television show is a small play. And so he says, "We want to try that play out in the small provinces first, before we bring it to New York."

So they will have a thing rewritten, for chrissake, 10 times. And I say that there is certainly more than one way to tell a story. You can go two or three approaches or even four. But I think that constant rewrite loses some of the original spontaneity and feeling of it.

Now, of course, I can probably be proven completely wrong because all of the Norman Lear shows are critically acclaimed as great. They're up there in the ratings. But I've got to say, it's a lot of extra work for —

Jacobs: It's impossible for them to take a first script. They just don't think that way. So the people that get paid to rewrite have to rewrite whether it needs it or not.

True. We were telling George Burns about it the other day. He says, "Well, I'll put in my joke and take out your joke."

Fox: True. That is true. That is what happens on so many occasions. I mean, we don't mean to sit here complaining and say that the good old days were much better, you know. It's just a different concept at the present time.

Lucy is the producer, director and everything on her show. I mean, she would tell a producer what to do and the director what to do and what various shots to take, because she was a talent and she knew what was best for her.

Q: Would she change any of the scripts or go over them with the writers?

Fox: The beautiful thing, she would never change a script unless she talked to the writers first. On occasions, though, she would say, “There’s something about this. I don’t know.” And I would say, “What’s wrong with it?” And on many occasions she couldn’t articulate what was wrong, and she could throw out a good story idea or maybe on occasion the whole script, just because there was something about it that she didn’t feel was right.

And, of course, you’ll never have a chance to prove who was right or wrong on that sort of thing. When she was with Desi Arnaz, she’d get these feelings on occasion, and he would say, “Lucy, I think it’s great. I think it’s funny. Let’s try it. If it doesn’t work we’ll throw it out.”

And I would say on 99 percent of the times, they do the show and it turned out to be fine. But, Cy, do you have any little comments on Lucy?

Jacobs: What we liked about her is that she respected everyone’s positions. When she hired people, she thought they were the best. That’s why she hired them.

Fox: One of the toughest things is getting the basic story. After you get the story, if you know your characters and you have all your people all set and you know...then I shouldn’t say it’s easy to write it, but you write it. At the present time they will get a story from two kids who are coming off the street who have been writing for a week. But if they have a germ of a story, they’ll say, “Good. Write.”

Now on occasion they will not even use one word these kids wrote but they were willing to pay...for the story.

On “The Danny Thomas Show,” for about three years straight, just about eight weeks or so before the show started on the air, Danny Thomas would be up in Las Vegas playing at the Sands or something. And the writers — there’d be about two teams,

sometimes three teams, who would get a few basic ideas, we'd all go to Las Vegas and we'd meet with Danny and Sheldon, say from 10 in the morning until 2 in the afternoon.

And we'd pitch stories and say, "This sounds good." And we'd sort of kick things around and have all this blocked out. So each team of writers were going to have five or six or seven stories approved. And then we'd write them up and this saved a lot of trouble and time.

But, see, they had confidence in the pros being able to block out that story and write. That's how it was mostly, I think, during the '50s and early '60s.

Jacobs: We did three years of "Bachelor Father." About 30 shows there. That was backup staff, because it used about three teams.

Q: On "Bachelor Father," when they used three teams, did you get to write, did you propose the ideas and get to write pretty much what you wanted to?

Jacobs: You came in with your ideas. And you worked it out with a very bright and intelligent story mind, like Edward Freeman. And you knew when you brought in the first draft there could be a rewrite. Sometimes it was rough, sometimes it wasn't. But at least you knew that it was going to go on the air, one way or the other because we knew what we were going to write. And now, geez, we did a "Maude." The funniest "Maude" they ever had. But they changed everything. It was based on something —

Q: Which one was it?

Jacobs: Where she gets the ashes of her ex-husband. It was based on his having his mother's ashes in his bedroom closet for four years because he wasn't able to dispose of what she wanted [5].

Fox: It was true. It was one of those things you kept putting off. You know? We have a home up in Northern California, and she wanted the ashes spread over at the old ranch. Now the ranch was owned by someone else and it was a little difficult to get in. Cy used to have lines, though. I mean, mother was in our closet and we'd be at a party and he'd say, "Have you heard that Fred's mother was bitten by a moth?" Or he'd say —

Jacobs: She's getting a new lid for Easter.

Fox: And my mother would have appreciated it. So it's perfectly alright.

Q: How do you get your ideas? For example, the "Maude" one you got from something that really happened.

Jacobs: You do it quite often. You also get ideas from something you've done before where it doesn't come out like the same story because there are different people doing, but basically it could be the same.

Fox: There's a great big switch at the present time, of course. As soon as "All in the Family" came on or "Maude" came on they — you had to get something shocking or sex. Like Maude catches a social disease or some taboo something, for chrissake, that you couldn't even touch in the '50s and early '60s. And you really wouldn't want to.

Maybe our stories of the '50s and '60s might have been kind of cliché, or the so-called *Saturday Evening Post*-type stories as compared to *The New Yorker* stories and maybe they were kind of saccharine.

Jacobs: They were always looking for offbeat on "Maude." Shockers, really.

Q: Do you think those kind of shows will be as funny in 20 years as, say, "The Honeymooners" and "Burns and Allen" are now?

Fox: I don't think so at all, personally. I think a toilet flushing on a show to get laughs to me is embarrassing. I mean, Christ almighty, if you're going to hear that show 10 years from now, people are going to say, "They have to be kidding." [6] Do you have to revert to a toilet flushing to get laughs? Maybe I seem to be going overboard here —

Jacobs: Well, you don't want to work for Norman Lear anymore!

Fox: "All in the Family" is a very funny show and a very well-written show.

Jacobs: I think it'll hold up for over 30 years.

Fox: Maybe. And there's a lot of talent. All good writers.

Jacobs: The staff for "All in the Family" are all [veteran] writers. In fact, they said of Norman Lear's writing staff — it's so quiet over there, you hear the arteries harden.

They like seasoned writers and the Mary Tyler Moore stable are mostly younger writers, although the producers — some of the producers are seasoned.

Q; How was it to write in the '50s and early '60s as compared to now?

Jacobs: We'd get multiple assignments. The freelance writer would get multiple assignments. Now they'll assign it to 13 writers. Because everybody wants to see what they've got. They finally get something wrong and they dump out half of the script.

Fox: True. They would say, "Can you do 10 'Real McCoy' scripts for us and 10 'Danny Thomas' scripts?" Or, "Do you want to do seven 'Danny Thomas' and so many 'Joey Bishops'?" and things of that sort. You were able to know what your year was going to be.

Jacobs: There were a couple of hundred writers then, and we think we have at least 500 now doing comedy.

Q: You've worked on half-hour shows and you've worked on variety shows. How do the two differ in approaches to comedy?

Jacobs: Well, there's an immediate deadline on the variety shows.

Fox: And you don't usually have the same running characters. You know, there's usually a guest star on the show and they do sketches.

Jacobs: It's a formula, right? You know, the Skelton show was departmentalized. The monologue, and the silent spot [7], and when we were on it, they did long sketches like a three-act play.

We like the variety show, because it's a weekly check.

Fox: Working the freelance market and doing enough shows a year, fortunately enough we've been able to do [that]. I would prefer that to a staff job on a variety show.

Jacobs: He doesn't really want to work as hard as I do. To get a script finished, it used to be maybe two or three weeks. Now you have three meetings sometimes just on story.

Fox: You have to be writing, say, two or three shows at the same time. Because when you're waiting to hear from one group, you know, you could be writing another one. That's the ideal situation. And as I've said, so far we've been very lucky and we wish our wives were independently wealthy, but oddly enough, they aren't, which is a terrible thing to know about.



Jacobs: In the mid '50s I worked the thing with — Johnny Carson was the star. It was called “Earn Your Vacation.” It was a game show. In fact, he talks about it once in a while. He told about a contestant who won a trip to Australia. And when he did the joke, he says, “He’s still there, waiting to win a trip back.”

And from that, he and I wrote a pilot that sold. He had a half-hour show in 1956 and Revlon bought it. And right after they bought it, they were kind of sorry because they’d also bought “The \$64,000 Question.” And that was, you know, that was doing very well.

But Johnny’s show was...I mean, I always liked it because the material was rather incisive and he was good. To the last line.

It was a half-hour variety show. he would do sketches. Sketches and monologues. “The Johnny Carson Show.” Only lasted one year. I think it was around '56. [8]

The main difference now [is] how many staff writers they have on now. But they buy material from the outside. And you keep coming in and coming in with new ideas till they finally like one.

Fox: Which is rather time-consuming.

Jacobs: The Lear shows like “All in the Family,” a lot of them are staff-written.

Fox: “The Jeffersons,” we got a few “Jeffersons” shows.

Jacobs: We like working for the Lear shows because we know the chances are very good for rewrites. Norman sat me down before him [and] suggested a certain character, and we wrote it and when we saw it on the air, it was a different character.

That’s why Hal Kanter didn’t stay with him. He was in a position to do the rewriting, and I think he feels that a lot of the changes are arbitrary.

Fox: And he had a very interesting quote in *Variety*. He said, “I’m too rich and too old to take this kind of shit. That’s what it said right in *Variety*. [Laughs.] Which was cute, I thought.

Q: What to you makes a good situation comedy?

Jacobs: First of all, you’ve got to like the characters who are in it.

Fox: True.

Jacobs: That's what keeps a show on, really. Jack Benny said years ago, "To start in television you have to be liked." But the thing is, you have to feel that there's a story that's going to be interesting.

Fox: Right.

Jacobs: Now in the old days they used to worry and say, "This is a visual comedy. This is a visual medium. Let's see some action." Lear doesn't worry about any of those things. He doesn't worry about sets either. Because he does it the most economical way. He uses maybe two sets in front of an audience. That's one reason I think he can afford a large writing staff.

Fox: True. Well, he has said, "These are little plays we're putting on." He isn't interested in movement and action. I think the most important thing, you have to like the characters, and also they should always remain in character. That is important.

That was what was so funny about "The Jack Benny Show." If someone said, "Mr. Benny, how old are you?" they'd start laughing right there. You have almost your built-in laughs.

And the old "Fibber McGee and Molly" shows, he said, "Well, I think I'll check in the hall closet." And people started laughing immediately. Because they were anticipating what was going to happen. If a situation comedy has interesting characters, and the audience knows how they're going to react, they're anticipating it.

Like the kids like to re-read the bedtime stories and fairy tales. There's something about that, I think, in a successful situation comedy.

Q: Do you have a favorite character that you wrote for on a situation comedy? Was "Andy Griffith" better to write for than "The Real McCoys" because of the characters?

Fox: We used to love "The Real McCoy" character, Walter Brennan, even though it was hokey. As they sometimes say, they're cardboard characters. On "The Lucy Show," Gale Gordon, who played Mr. Mooney, he was the best goddamned comedian. If you give him a line, you know that he'd get a laugh. This was just a pro. His timing was beautiful and Lucy's also.

It was a pleasure, certainly, writing for “The Lucy Show.” I’m not saying it should win an Academy Award for great acting or anything, but they weren’t playing it that way. They were playing it as if they were a cartoon, a vaudeville show.

Jacobs: When the character is so well-delineated, because it’s the predictable things he does that are nice for the writer. When we were on “The Real McCoys,” Dick Crenna said, “It was funny, but it was a one-joke show.” So it lasted a while. That was “The Beverly Hillbillies”... it was a one-joke show.

Fox: The one joke was enough to sustain it.

Q: When you’re writing a half-hour, you have to have points of laughter, and there are points that aren’t necessarily funny. How do you know when the laughs should come?

Fox: If you’re a good writer, you should be able to get laughs, even when you’re doing the so-called exposition. [9] You should still have a chuckle or two. We would try never to have a page without a couple of laughs on it.

Jacobs: He’s probably referring to the treacle they used to have on “Danny Thomas” and also “Father Knows Best.”

Fox: Well, of course, true. Of course to go straight for a while helps the comedy. So you can have your one extreme to the other. On “The Danny Thomas Show” they used to refer to it as the treacle cutter. After the heart stuff, you’d have a zinger joke to get out of it. Which was called the treacle cutter.

Q: Are there certain situations you know that will always be funny?

Jacobs. Yeah. We’ll give you an example of one we try to use now and then. Remember “Gaslight”? A very serious thing. Jack Benny did a comedy “Gaslight.” But we have found it a very effective device. That is making someone believe that things are happening that the other person manufactured to get him to change his mind.

Fox: They think they’re crackin’ up, you know. And they say, “It’s all psychological. If you hadn’t pulled this thing, this wouldn’t have happened.” You know, it’s all in your mind.

Jacobs: We refer to a lot of things that have been used. And you're surprised in some of these modern type of Norman Lear shows, we would never suggest somebody being on a jury, because every show has done that. But when Edith was on the jury, that was a good show [10]. I mean, when Lucy was on the jury [in an episode of "Here's Lucy"] it was a whole different show. [11]

Fox: In other words, we would never suggest it. Or that someone is hypnotized and then something happens. We'd say, "Good God, you can't possibly do that over again."

Jacobs: They used to call it "Uncle Charlie comes to visit." You know, there's always somebody who comes to the house to louse up the situation.

Fox: And how to get rid of him. Maybe you'll take an old joke and switch for a situation, but I must say, you always try not to. For many reasons. Because the producer or the star might remember the joke and say, "For chrissake, I'm paying them just to get the old jokes."

And not only that, but there's a certain sort of a half-assed pride I presume that you're always trying to get original material.

Red Skelton on many occasions...we'd sit there with the writers and we'd write a new sketch and think it was pretty good. And it was pretty good. And Skelton would come in there and before you know it, he'd have changed the thing and he has old jokes in there. Old jokes.

Through the head writer somebody would say, "For chrissake, Red, why didn't you try the new material?" He'd say, "Look, these are old jokes to us, but there's a new generation coming up every four or five years. They never heard these jokes. And these jokes are proven, tried and true. Give them to them again. They never heard them before. To the audience they're brand-new."

And he had a point, perhaps.

Jacobs: And if they didn't go over, we got blamed for it.

Fox: Right. He says, "You're going to write this crap for me? Where are the laughs?" [Laughs.] It's true.

Q: I always thought that the success of a lot of the Andy Griffith shows was Don Knotts... that kind of character.

Fox: It's true. Absolutely.

Q: Was he originally planned to be a major character or did he just evolve as one because people discovered that he was funny?

Fox: I think Sheldon Leonard was the one that picked him for the cast. Because he had seen him onstage, and I think it was "No Time for Sergeants."

Jacobs: He was in that. He was the psychiatrist. [12]

Fox: He just worked out beautifully. On many occasions you will try another character and, say, for instance, the town drunk that used to come in on "The Andy Griffith Show" on occasions. Sometimes you'll try a character, a cousin comes in, and the character doesn't really work out. The charisma's wrong or something — and so you drop him and try something else.

Jacobs: Do you remember the show that started "The Andy Griffith Show"? On "The Danny Thomas Show"? [13]

Fox: It was a spinoff from "The Danny Thomas Show."

Jacobs: He was going through this North Carolina town, and the sheriff stopped him for speeding or something like that.

Fox: That's the beauty of having a successful show. You do a spinoff for another show, which they did on "All in the Family" and spun off the "Maude" show. It's the same thing they're doing with "The Mary Tyler Moore Show," which is great. It's the cheapest way to make a pilot too.

Q: When you work as partners, do you — does one write the storyline —

Jacobs: No, we collaborate.

Fox: We collaborate on everything.

Jacobs: In our case, I know that Fred is much stronger on stories. I recognize my own weakness there.

Fox: And Cy is great on lines and funny things.

Jacobs: That's good of you to say, Fred. It's nice to hear that about a comedy writer. Funny things.

Fox: And another thing too, though...Cy on innumerable occasions comes up with the idea for a story.

Jacobs: And he knows how to write.

Fox: I can block them out pretty well.

See, obviously it isn't easy to find a writing partner ...because there has to be a certain, whatever the hell it is, chemistry or something.

Jacobs: You've got to stand each other.

Fox: True, true.

Jacobs: I can't stand him because he's a nut. He can't stand me because I'm a nut.

Fox: Wait a minute, there was another profound thing I wanted to mention... blew it again.

Jacobs: We're talking about complimenting each other. That's the subject. Is that what you're talking about?

Fox: Oh, yeah.

Jacobs: Also not working for your agent and having your own contacts is important. You can't depend on an agent to go out and get you work. But you can depend on him to collect commission for it.

Fox: I would say 95 percent of our assignments come through people who we worked with and for in the past.

Q: Are teams still as popular for comedy writing now as they were in the '60s?

Fox: I would say definitely yes.

Jacobs: And it does burn us up when we know of a guy who can go in and get \$5,000 for a script and Fred and I have to divide the \$5,000.

Fox: But theoretically the team is supposed to be able to write faster and more shows than a single.

Q: Do you find when you work with a partner that it's usually a better script than one that you had written by yourself?

Fox: I would say 90 per cent of the time, yes. Because you have two minds working on it. On certain occasions you can probably luck out and write a script almost as well but I don't believe so. It sure as hell takes longer.

Jacobs: They think they're getting more for their money when they hire a team. A friend of mine didn't get on "Lucy" because he was working by himself.

Q: Do you think that things that were funny in your comedies of the 1950s are still funny today?

Jacobs: I don't think so. Basic relationships, you know, are the same, but I think people are a little more sophisticated now.

Fox: Do you remember "The Dobie Gillis Show"? My ex-partner and I wrote about three or four or five of them. But I'll bet they would stand up in the present time.

Q: Did you have a favorite show that you worked for, of all of the shows you've been on staff?

Jacobs: I think "Andy Griffith" would be...

Fox: I wouldn't say that was my favorite, though. I really don't think I have a favorite. I used to like "The Real McCoys" show, but the producer wasn't the type that was conducive to liking him.

Jacobs: I would say "Lucy" would be mine because she treated us so well and appreciated what we did and was nice. And I thought it was a prestige show even though we'd come to a time in our business where I think most of the comedy writers thought Lucille Ball comedy was a thing of the past.

Fox: Oh, true. I mean, the credits of the Skelton show and the Lucy show were nothing.

Jacobs: The agent would say, "Come up with something current." Like it was a curse.

Fox: So, see, the idiots don't realize that when you're a professional writer, you give them what they want and what they can handle. I mean, you couldn't do an "All in the

Family” story for “Lucy” because she’d throw it out and shoot you. Because that isn’t for her. So you’re writing for the characters that you’re writing for.

Jacobs: There are people in the business who...

Fox: That typecast you.

Jacobs: They’ll say, “They’re Lucy writers.” Then the agent has to say, “But they just did two ‘Maudes’ and they did a ‘Chico’ and a ‘Jeffersons.’”

Fox: During the ‘50s, George [Burns] had a production company. And he produced a show called “The Mona McCluskey Show.” Remember that, with Juliette Prowse?

Well, my ex-partner [Irving Elinson] and I wrote all of them, and we were working with George, and Cy...

Jacobs: Ed James and I did “No Time for Sergeants” [1964-65, ABC]. Thirty-two out of 34.

Fox: George was—here’s how we’d work, which was typical of certain operations. My partner and I would come in every Monday with as much of a story as we could possibly get. We had the basic idea for a story, and if that wouldn’t go, we had a few little small ideas for a story. We came in. We pitched the story, and there’d be George, Norman Paul, Elon Packard and George’s brother, Willie. And then between this group—all pros—we would block out the whole goddamned story, with the angles for comedy. The important thing in a situation comedy is each scene not only progresses the story, but it has to be funny. It has to have an angle of humor in the scene because that’s a situation comedy.

At least these were good comedies. And so we’d all block out the story, and then my partner and I would go home and write it. Tuesday, Wednesday, Thursday, Friday. Sometimes Saturday. We’d come in and we’d deliver the script Monday. We’d also have another story.

Here was a staff that wrote the shows, and they were all good shows. But I think at the present time, they just do 84 hours of overwork that’s unnecessary.



When we were doing “The Joey Bishop Show,” you remember how Joey used to say, let’s not do...I mean, it’s not really a story. It was kind of a vignette. Which is great on occasion. Just a vignette of life, as opposed to a complicated story.

Jacobs: He’s the guy, we had a funny line in there. One of the scripts he says, “The writers just put that in because they thought it was funny.” There was validity in his objections. That line might’ve been funny but it didn’t belong there.

Fox: True, and that I’m proud of him, actually.

Jacobs: But we thought it was a funny joke. Looking back on it, I think he had a good point. With hostility he said it.

Fox: Oh, yes.

Jacobs: Ask, is it true that Joey Bishop beat the shit out of him [Fox]. We’ll give you 10 minutes on that.

Fox: Forty minutes.

Jacobs: It was a physical encounter.

Q: What was it like when you came out here in the ‘50s and were writing? Was it a different environment than it is for you now?

Fox: I came out in the latter part of the ‘40s. I shouldn’t say I came out, I came from San Francisco, and of course you have to remember there was no television at that time. I think it was probably the easiest transition in the world to blend from radio into television.

Jacobs: First of all, there weren’t as many writers out here. It wasn’t as competitive as it is now.

Fox: It was very thrilling. You came to town. You’d hit the big time, quote-unquote, and it was a thrill, and oddly enough it still is a thrill in a way, isn’t it?

Jacobs: It seems like a long climb when you came in those days. Now a fellow can start not only in the freelance market, almost at the top. If he sells his script, by his second script he’s going to make as much as we made after being here 30 years.

My first assignment out here was through a former friend, who was working on a story outline for the Andrews Sisters, for a movie. When I finished that, he got me with Jack Paar, who loved Fred Allen. I'd already done some Fred Allen, even though it was only a few weeks.

I was just being tried out. But I wrote some stuff, and he liked it, and he had seen what I'd done for Fred Allen. I worked with Jack on the monologue: "Hello? Hello, this is Jack. Hello, this is Jack Paar. Hello, and for those of you who just tuned in, goodbye." Something like that.

Q: You had to work a lot of different jobs before you started making money and being successful. Do you think that helped you as far as being funny now?

Jacobs: I think everything you've written helps you on something you write later on. I found myself maturing because I started late in my own career in the business. I was a press agent before the war, and then I came out here as a writer. So I don't think I was very good at the beginning. I feel I've improved through experience.

Q: Do you think situation comedy was better in the '50s and early '60s than it is now?

Fox: No. The future is just as good.

Jacobs: They're getting away with more, but they have more freedom in what they can say.

Fox: And another thing too. We never tried to put any political viewpoint or anything over in a situation comedy. You're a comedy show. You wrote to make people laugh, and for a form of escapism perhaps. Now Norman [Lear] has a political viewpoint all over. They try to put it over very subtly.

Maude caught the clap or something. Christ knows I'm not square. I'm one of the original naughty men, for chrissake, but I don't think screwing is a spectator sport. I think it should be done in the privacy of your home, and you shouldn't be flashing it all over the air.

Jacobs: Well, that's a little different thing, though. You're talking about porno.

Fox: Well, Christ, all that stuff, as far as I'm concerned, is porno.

The question, are the shows at the present time as funny as they always were? To be honest, I'd have to say yes.

Jacobs: And they're more mature.

Fox: The shows I've seen are extremely good and very well-written. But oddly enough, I've kind of changed. The situation comedy isn't my favorite art form anymore. I just have to force myself to watch it. I'd rather read something.

Jacobs: He doesn't even care to watch the shows he's worked on.

Fox: Well, not at the present time, when there's a hell of a lot of rewrite on them. I just refuse to watch them.

Jacobs: They loved the show we did for "The Jeffersons." I went down and sat in the audience. I recognized a line. I get up and have to take a bow.

Fox: It's embarrassing. I'm going to tell you, all writers go through [it] at the present time, and I think the greatest pleasure that we used to get in the '50s and the '60s and early '70s, when we wrote something, it was there, for chrissakes. Word for word. And I mean, if there was change we were consulted on it. The thrill was hearing your own crapola getting laughs from the audience and you wrote it.

Jacobs: You know what makes no sense? There are certain guys, I guess back on this Norman Lear show, who are in a position now to rewrite other people's scripts who couldn't get a story through on other Norman Lear shows, and here we are, we came from "Lucy." They were pretty funny scripts. I think they compare to some of the Lear things, even if it's a different type of comedy.

Q: You've worked with a lot of stars—were there people you enjoyed working with who were really good with lines that you wrote?

Fox: Gale Gordon was fabulous, and of course Bob Hope was fantastic, and Danny Thomas could certainly read a punch line.

Jacobs: Now, Lucy, sometimes when she's reading a script for the first time, you'd have to tell her what the point was.

Fox: True.

Jacobs: She certainly understood the humor once she was reading it. She's got the glasses, I guess, and she's thinking about the thing.

Fox: Bob Hope said, when I was with him, my wife was pregnant and it turned out to be twins, and I rushed up and I said, "Hey, Bob, you won't believe this—I'm going to have twins." And he just turned around and he said, "This kid doesn't only stutter when he talks."

Now that's not a bad line. And he adlibbed that: "He doesn't only stutter when he talks." Fantastic.

Jacobs: My wife had gotten friendly with Lucy because they played backgammon. So we're at a party together and Lucy was surrounded by some people and my wife didn't want to go over and say hello. So she passed and Lucy sees her and says, "Hello, Jody. Remember me? I used to be in television."

You know, the point we made before is something that doesn't happen. A big difference in freelance writing is that in the old days they'd get the minimum of two and three. Now you're a bunch of—they call them cattle calls. In the beginning of the season, they put their pilot on the screen in a small room. You're in there with 12, 14 other writers, and you're running home and you have to get a story they like before the others get it. Didn't happen before. They knew that when they gave you a commitment before, you were going to get a story for them.

And now they don't give a commitment until they have a story they like. Then they say, "OK, write it up." Then they cut you up. Now they can take that story and write the rest of it themselves. They do that. They have the staff to do it.

Fox: But it's never happened to us.

Jacobs: Not that we know of. But sometimes when they change the script, they sort of change the story. The thing they tell you to write, they say after the rewrite, they tell you what to do and then the committee gets in the room...

Fox: So we aren't as intrigued with the way things are set up at the present time than it used to be.

Jacobs: Well, we were more wide-eyed in those days too. But I still get a kick out of hearing myself on the air.

I'll tell you the other thing I think is an improvement, and that's the manner of shooting the show. You used to do film, you'd have to put the laughs in. Now you have a studio right there. You know pretty much what's funny. Of course, there are ways of sweetening the small laughs where you should get bigger laughs. They have a feeling of immediacy and presence of an audience, which is better than it was before.

Fox: That was the beauty when we were writing for Lucy. She was the only one you had to please. You didn't have to go through a producer, who in turn would go through Lucy. You would work directly with these people. That's the beauty of working with George Burns on the special—you're sitting writing for the person who's going to go up and put it on. So what he says, that's it. "George, should it be this way?" he says, "No, it should be this way." In certain cases he'd say, "You're right." So this was a plus on the staff, in many ways.

Jacobs: I remember when I was working for Fred Allen he would barter. A guy named Mr. Button came down from NBC, and he'd have eight paperclips and he would take out four jokes and leave four. But Allen would put in an extra four, and so...

Fox: That's a bargain. We put little risqué things in, and we thought the same thing then that Norman Lear is trying to do now because I'm more of a bold fart now than I was then.

Comedy writers usually know each other because of the years you've been working on the same shows.

Jacobs: We did in the old days. Now there are 500.

Fox: Well, true, true.

Jacobs: We used to have comedy writers' lunches and dinners. We did three of them for four different guys, and three of them died and the fourth one almost died. So we cut it out. It was like the kiss of death.

Fox: I used to organize these things.

Jacobs: And Hal Cantor says I did it because I made more money as a caterer than I did as a writer.

## NOTES

### Introduction

1. James Greenberg, "Sitcom Writing: Riches Plus Respectability," *New York Times*, August 5, 1990. Section 2, p. 27.
2. Milt Josefsberg, *The Jack Benny Show*. (New Rochelle, New York: Arlington House, 1977) p. 122.
3. After researching where these writers worked and lived, letters were sent to them explaining this oral history project and asking for their participation in in-person interviews in Los Angeles and New York. In letters of their own, all of the writers agreed to be interviewed.
4. David G. Grote, *The End of Comedy: The Sit-Com and the Comedic Tradition*. (Hamden, Connecticut: Archon, 1983) p. 18.
5. *Ibid.*, p. 18.
6. *Ibid.*, p. 55.
7. *Ibid.*, p. 59.
8. *Ibid.*, p. 105.
9. Michael V. Tueth, *Laughter in the Living Room*. (New York: Peter Lang, 2005) pp. 1-2.
10. Lisa Miriam Heilbronn, *Domesticating Social Change*. (Berkeley: University of California, 1986; dissertation) p. 36.
11. *Ibid.*, p. 49.
12. David Marc. *Comic Visions: Television Comedy and American Culture*. (Boston: Unwin Hyman, 1989).
13. Lori Landay, "'I Love Lucy': Television and Gender in Postwar Domestic Ideology," in *The Sitcom Reader: America Viewed and Skewed*, Mary M. Dalton and

Laura R. Linda, editors. (Albany: The State University of New York Press, 2005) pp. 88-90.

14. John Hartley, "Situation Comedy, Part 1," in *The Television Genre Book*, Glen Creeber, editor. (London: BFI Publishing 2001) pp. 69-70.

15. Mary Beth Haralovich, "Sit-coms and Suburbs," in *Private Screenings : Television and the Female Consumer*, Lynn Spigel and Denise Mann, editors. (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1992) p. 115 .

16. Jackie Gleason's lower-class upbringing informed his portrayal of Ralph Kramden, according to William A. Henry III, *The Great One: The Life and Legend of Jackie Gleason*. (New York: Doubleday, 1992) p. 14, and Norman Lear's opinionated father was embodied in the character of Archie, according to *Time* magazine, September 25, 1972 [Time web archive].

17. Richard Butsch, "A Half Century of Class and Gender in American TV Domestic Sitcoms," *Cercles* 8 (2003) p. 21.

18. Grote, op. cit., p. 109.

19. Virginia Wright Wexman, "The Carnavalesque and Television Comedy," in *Critiquing the Sitcom*, Joanne Morreale, editor. (Syracuse, New York: Syracuse University Press, 2003) p. 59.

20. Ibid., p. 68.

21. Sean Campbell, *The Sitcoms of Norman Lear*. (Jefferson, N.C.: McFarland & Company, Inc., Publishers, 2007) p. 36.

22. Butsch, op. cit., p. 28.

23. Patricia Mellencamp, "Situation Comedy, Feminism, and Freud," in *Critiquing the Sitcom*, Joanne Morreale, editor. (Syracuse, New York: Syracuse University Press, 2003) p. 54.

24. William Boddy, *Fifties Television: The Industry and Its Critics* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1990) p. 1.

25. Interview with Sydney Zelinka, September 20, 1976, New York City.



26. Henry, op. cit., p. 148.
27. Interview with Larry Rhine, October 19, 1976, Los Angeles.
28. Interview with Seaman Jacobs and Fred S. Fox, October 18, 1976, Los Angeles.
29. Rhine interview, op. cit.
30. Coyne Stevens Sanders and Tom Gilbert, *Desilu: The Story of Lucille Ball and Desi Arnaz* (New York: William Morrow, 1993) pp. 309-10.
31. Jacobs and Fox interview, op. cit.
32. Rhine interview, op. cit.
33. Jacobs and Fox interview, op. cit.
34. *Time* magazine, op. cit.
35. Rhine interview, op. cit.

Chapter One: Syndey Zelinka:

1. *New York Times*, January 19, 1981. p. D11.
2. Ibid.
3. A blackout is quick sketch in which a punch line is followed by the lights going out.
4. "Papa Bilko," written with A.J. Russell, November 5, 1957, won the Writers Guild Award.
5. "Pal O' Mine," November 19, 1955.
6. "A Man's Pride," September 22, 1956. This was the last of the original 39 episodes of "The Honeymooners."
7. A chain, or circuit, of vaudeville theaters started by B.F. Keith.
8. "A Man's Pride," September 22, 1956.
9. "Two on the Aisle," March 16, 1969.

## Chapter Two: Larry Rhine:

1. Archive of American Television, Feb. 23, 2000.
2. *New York Times*, Nov. 11, 2000. p. C16.
3. A radio program that ran from 1934-46, with a hiatus from 1942-45.
4. The Office of War Information operated from 1942-45.
5. "Susanna Strikes Oil," October 5, 1957.
6. "Show Biz," March 24, 1960.
7. "The Unemployment Story," October 6, 1976 (part one) and October 13, 1976 (part two).
8. The quotation is from Immanuel Kant: "Laughter is an affection arising from the sudden transformation of a strained expectation into nothing."
9. Episode 257, October 22, 1947.
10. "Archie Finds a Friend," January 26, 1976.
11. "Meet the Bunkers," January 12, 1971, series premiere.
12. The sketch that generally ended "The Red Skelton Hour" in its later years, in which Skelton pantomimed Freddie the Freeloader or another silent character.
13. "When Nut-Hood Was in Flower," January 4, 1966.
14. The American Heart Association is based in Miami.
15. "Archie's Weighty Problem," February 9, 1976.
16. "A Concert in Pantomime," February 2, 1965.
17. "Lucy the Skydiver," September 21, 1970.
18. Prime-time network viewership was considerably higher in the 1970s than it is in 2010. "All in the Family" regularly drew more than 20 million viewers an episode. Forty years later, the most-watched prime time show in July 2010, "America's Got Talent," was seen by almost 12 million viewers.

### Chapter Three: Milt Josefsberg:

1. Milt Josefsberg, *Comedy Writing* (New York: Harper & Row, Publishers, 1987) p. xv.
2. Here's Lucy" followed "The Lucy Show," which the star ended after she had sold Desilu Productions, which had produced that series. "Here's Lucy" was produced by Lucille Ball Productions.
3. Josefsberg, op. cit., p. xii.
4. Other shows Josefsberg worked on developing were "Johnny Moccasin," "The Further Adventures of Huckleberry Finn" (*Billboard*, December 17, 1955), and "Friendly Persuasion" (*Billboard*, October 22, 1955).
5. A writer who offers advice on plotting, structure, pacing, and, in the case of comedy, refining jokes.
6. *Gaslight* was the 1944 thriller directed by George Cukor in which the villainous character played by Charles Boyer tries to convince his quiet wife (played by Ingrid Bergman) that she is losing her mind.
7. "Archie Finds a Friend," written by Larry Rhine, January 26, 1976.
8. "Mod Mod Lucy," written by Milt Josefsberg and Ray Singer, September 23, 1968.
9. "Lucy Helps Craig Get a Driver's License," March 17, 1969.
10. "Archie's Operation: Part One," October 27, 1976.

### Chapter Four: Seaman Jacobs and Fred S. Fox:

1. *New York Times*, November 4, 2005. p. c14.
2. In addition to his comedy writing, Jacobs also gained some measure of fame for his marriage to the former burlesque queen Margie Hart from 1942 to 1955; Ms. Hart later married Los Angeles city council member John Ferraro and became a prominent socialite in that city. *New York Times*, January 30, 2000. p. 3.

3. The Seaman Jacobs Scripts, Special Collections Research Center, Syracuse University Library.
4. *Variety*, April 18, 2008.
5. "Poor Albert," December 8, 1975.
6. "Meet the Bunkers," January 12, 1971, series premiere.
7. The sketch that generally ended "The Red Skelton Hour" in its later years, in which Skelton pantomimed Freddie the Freeloader or another silent character.
8. The program, a prime-time variety show, ran during the 1955-56 season on CBS.
9. Exposition provides the background information for a scene or sketch, sometimes provided by a narrator or a character that does not appear regularly.
10. "Edith Has Jury Duty," March 9, 1971.
11. "Lucy and Joan Rivers Do Jury Duty," November 5, 1973.
12. Knotts played the character Cpl. Manual Dexterity in both the Broadway and movie productions.
13. "Danny Meets Andy Griffith," February 15, 1960.

## VITA

Steven Vern Reddicliffe was born in Highland Park, Illinois. He received a Bachelor of Science from the Medill School of Journalism at Northwestern University in Evanston, Illinois in June, 1975. He has been the television critic for the *Miami Herald*, the *Baltimore News-American*, and the *Dallas Times Herald*. He was a general editor at *Entertainment Weekly* magazine, the editor-in-chief of *Parenting* magazine, and the editor-in-chief of *TV Guide*. He is currently a media editor at the *New York Times*.

Permanent Address: 24 Homer Ave.  
Larchmont, New York 10538

This thesis was typed by the author.