

'CAVALCADE OF AMERICA' MARCHES ON

By FLORA RHETA SCHREIBER

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RETURN OF A VIOLINIST



Back from a long tour, during which he entertained troops in the Mediterranean war theatre, J. Benny, the Waukegan wag, starts his new season tonight at the familiar time and place—7 o'clock on WEAF-NBC.

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"CAVALCADE OF AMERICA" (WEAF-NBC, Mondays, 8 P. M.) has reached a milestone. Just eight years ago yesterday it presented its first script, "No Turning Back," a two-part documentary concerned with the tenacious spirit of the Pilgrims and of their descendants. Carlyle Stevens, the original narrator, struck the note the program was to play on consistently. "As you watch the American Cavalcade pass in review," he said, "you find much that is not pomp and circumstance. A certain doggedness and perseverance, a willingness to stick it out at all costs, is the most distinguished attribute of the American."

The central thought of the originators of the program was to show how American character has been illustrated in our history. Each program was to deal with a different trait or tendency. In the early days the theme was didactically stated in titles like that of the opening script. With time, however, although the underlying intention was unchanged, the presentation became less dogmatic. From being essentially a thesis play in which the moral was underscored, the typical "Cavalcade" script became a play-drama, comedy, fantasy, melodrama, still with a serious purpose, but with a new sense of entertainment values.

Originally "Cavalcade" drew its themes from historic fact; later from both past and present, placing greater emphasis on the past; most recently it is largely concerned with the present, although an occasional script still deals with

A Ranking Dramatic Show Celebrates Its Eighth Anniversary

an event of the past that has sharp contemporary significance. Ninety-five per cent of its heroes have been real rather than fictional. Throughout its career it has paid tribute to the pioneers who laid the foundations of America, to the leaders in science, the arts, politics who are building its superstructure, and to everyday people who are its heart and pulse.

The Birth of a Script

Ideas for scripts come from many sources. It is up to a story committee at the agency that handles the show to decide which ideas are suitable. The committee consists of Homer Fickett, producer-director; George Kondolf, story editor; Julia Boyd, librarian of Princeton University, who is historical consultant; Arthur Pryor, agency radio department head. Until his death in July, John Anderson, drama critic of The Journal-American, also was a member.

The committee recommends the ideas it has selected to the sponsor (du Pont). Once the sponsor approves, the committee chooses a writer who gets to work on an outline for a script. Often, before the writer can go ahead with the development of the idea, he must track it down like a news reporter to see if there's really a script in it.

"Cavalcade" has long been a writer's radio. Its story committee believes that a dramatic radio program rises or falls largely because of the quality of its writing. Realizing that a good script can't be whipped up in the time it takes to make an omelet (radio's daily delusion), "Cavalcade" allows more time for the writing of a script than is customary. This is, of course, good for the script. It is also good for the writer. Says George Kondolf: "I am happy to say that the present fees paid by the agency for writers have enabled us to attract better authors and have allowed them to give more time to 'Cavalcade' and the scripts."

The late Stephen Vincent Benét, Robert Sherwood, Maxwell Anderson and Carl Sandburg have written original scripts for "Cavalcade." Among "names" who, like the Messrs. Sherwood, Anderson, Paul Peters and Arthur Arent, came to "Cavalcade" from the theatre, are Victor Wolfson, Isabel Leighton and Frank Gabrielson.

Mr. Kondolf, who has always felt that writing for the stage is about the most difficult technique in the world, believes that you can teach a playwright the special tricks of radio writing in little time. And this despite the cherished myth that radio writers, unique in the species of penmen, are a race apart, beamed directly from heaven, stopwatch in hand.

Expert Production

Nearly 1,000 man-hours each week and eleven and a half hours of rehearsal time are spent in the preparation of this half-hour show. All the activity centers around Homer Fickett, whose direction is both vigorous and rigorous, while the "Cavalcade" players include such skilled actors as Frank Readick, Edwin Jerome, Will Greer, Karl Swenson. The star, however, practically always comes from Broadway or Hollywood. Walter Hampden was the first star; Bob Hope is featured tomorrow night.

The company generally meets on a Tuesday for a first reading rehearsal, during which parts are assigned and the mood of the script

is set. The mike rehearsals follow on Thursday and on Monday. Now scene by scene is worked out in detail so that the script will connote a series of pictures and the effect will be of people at a specific moment in a specific place in a specific world. New ideas are constantly added to the script so that by the time the dress rehearsal takes place on Monday afternoon at 1:45 it is quite different from what it was at first.

But the script is not rewritten for the last time until the dress rehearsal is over and what's known as a "hash session" takes place. The director gives the cast these eleventh-hour changes when they return at 6:15 for the final run-through before you tune them.

'Cavalcade's' Achievement

The "Cavalcade" play like all radio drama is limited as a dramatic form. It cannot develop character, for instance. It must observe certain taboos, for another. And because its policy is to celebrate the achievement of American life, it cuts itself off from the possibilities of satire.

What "Cavalcade" cannot do, however, is less significant than what it can do. Not a small part of its success comes from its realization that the dramatic impulse is essentially the same, whatever the medium of expression—that a sense of plot, character, language, social forces is more fundamental than a knowledge of the meaning of a music bridge or a cross fade. The music bridge and the cross fade are important, of course, but they are the trees in the forest, not the forest itself, no matter what your trade loyalty. "Cavalcade" scripts have been matched and sometimes surpassed by scripts on other dramatic programs. Sometimes "Cavalcade" scripts have failed. However, for sustained achievement sustained over a period of eight years, "Cavalcade" is in the first rank.