

Ed Gardner and *Duffy's Tavern*

Kathy Hammel

If radio was a horse race and the shows horses, then anyone who bet on *Duffy's Tavern* would be a sure winner. Carrying the metaphor forward, the jockey for *Duffy's Tavern* would be the show's star, Ed Gardner, who voiced Archie, the tavern's manager.

Ed, whose original name was Friedrich (Eddie) Poggenburg, was a high school dropout. He never expected to be a radio star. He started his work life playing the piano and later moved on to sales. The sales job may have honed his natural fast talking, outgoing style. When in 1929 he met and married aspiring actress Shirley Booth, he changed his name to Ed Gardner and set about using his skills to promote her. His abilities as a promoter caught the attention of the J. Walter Thompson ad agency. They hired him to manage talent and radio shows for the agency. He also did some writing for various shows.

Ed's career as Archie began in 1939 when a show Ed managed, *This Is New York*, needed a character with a Brooklyn accent and he couldn't find an actor that was just right for a character named Archie. Ed, who came by his accent naturally having grown up in Astoria, Long Island, used himself as an example by reading the lines. His voicing was perfect and he was offered the role.

That show lasted only a single season, but Ed's fertile mind latched on to the Archie character and along with friend and fellow writer, Abe Burrows, developed a show around the character. Shortly after, in 1940, he was offered the opportunity to perform as Archie, the wisecracking barkeep, in the show he and Burrows named *Duffy's Tavern*. *Duffy's Tavern* debuted on *Forecast*, a summertime audition show that featured hopeful new radio series. As a result of that one appearance, *Duffy's Tavern* was picked up by Schick razors. *Duffy's Tavern*, as a sponsored series, was to premier in March 1941 on CBS. Gardner scrambled to assemble a memorable cast and a stable of writers. His then-wife, Shirley Booth, initially played the role of Miss Duffy.

Duffy's Tavern was not an immediate hit. It was slotted into poor time slots against popular shows on other networks. While the show managed to survive, his marriage to Booth did not. They divorced in 1943 and she left the show. By that time, even after quite a few changes of sponsors, locations, and networks, *Duffy's Tavern* thrived. Riding the wave of popularity, there was even a star-studded *Duffy's Tavern* movie in 1945. It didn't quite capture the charm of the radio series, however.

Duffy's Tavern radio show continued airing for 10 years. Late in its run Gardner moved himself and the program to Puerto Rico. The move may have started its decline. Ed is said to have moved there to avoid the high U.S. taxes. Puerto Rico offered attractive tax incentives to businesses setting up there so Ed moved his production and family there in 1949.

By 1950 he was characterized as a tax dodger in the newspapers and was losing listeners. He was eventually exonerated publicly since his move to Puerto Rico was legal. Even so, he struggled to bring in talent to Puerto Rico for the show from the U.S. mainland and had problems keeping a sponsor.

Slowly the show slipped in ratings and was no longer able to stand up to new competition and by 1951 *Duffy's Tavern* was off the air. Ed did attempt to revive interest with a 1954 television version but that lasted only one season. What worked for radio didn't always work on the small screen. It didn't help that Ed wasn't much of an actor, though he did do some small

roles from time to time on other shows.

As to his career as an actor, Duffy's Tavern was pretty much the only horse Ed had in the race and by the early '50s it had run its course. Gardner's health had started declining, even as *Duffy's Tavern* wound down and he died on August 17, 1963 at Good Samaritan Hospital in Hollywood. He left behind his second wife and their two sons.

Make sure to check out Martin Grams' book [Duffy's Tavern: A History of Ed Gardner's Radio Program](#) (2014) for the authoritative history of this program.