

Lon Clark

By Lynn Willis, Edited by Patrick Andre and Brian Kavanaugh

Lon Clark was born January 12, 1911, in Frost, Minnesota. His grandfather had emigrated from Norway and founded the town. After his father died in World War I, his mother remarried and the family relocated to a farm near Lakefield, Minnesota.

While in high school, Clark involved himself in the music and drama departments, and once took second place in the Minnesota State Music Contest playing the saxophone. He also won several dramatic competitions, and once won competitions for both drama and comedy.

After graduation, Clark found himself at the MacPhail School of Music in Minneapolis, where he met a private music teacher who would greatly influence his life. She agreed to teach him without charge, as she recognized him as a student who truly loved music and was eager to learn.

His first radio appearance was as a soloist in the MacPhail school choir during a Christmas program in 1928. He and a friend teamed up to do musical programs for local radio stations in Minneapolis. Soon after, he joined a tent show that would move to a town, perform different plays for a week, then move on to the next town.

In 1930, the director of the tent company encouraged Clark to move to Chicago where he transitioned to radio. He auditioned for station after station with little success. One radio director even told him, "Radio can do very well without you!" Finally, after some time at various Chicago stations, he received an offer from WLW in Cincinnati, Ohio to join a stock company of ten actors. Here he had the opportunity to play many roles, earning nice reviews for his work.

To further his career, he was faced with a decision: move to Hollywood with the chance of breaking into films, or to New York where he could do legitimate theater. He chose New York, and he and his wife moved there in 1941. He earned close to a thousand dollars in his first month, an unusually large sum for an aspiring actor. Clark would be in great demand on the New York radio scene.

In 1943, he received a call to audition for the Mutual Broadcasting System in a new production based on the Nick Carter dime novels. There were about 50 others auditioning for the role. Producer-director Jock MacGregor called him with the news that he had won the leading role for the series. *Nick Carter, Master Detective* started April 11, 1943, and lasted until September 25, 1955, for a total of 722 episodes. At one point, *Nick Carter* was placed in a time slot against Jack Benny. Though he never beat Benny in the ratings, *Nick Carter* was the highest rated show against Benny.

Clark also appeared in several other roles in many different shows. During his peak, Clark appeared in an average of twenty radio shows a week. These included *2000 Plus*, *The Thin Man*, *The March of Time*, *Lights Out*, *The Mysterious Traveler*, and *Report to the Nation*. He also garnered the leading role in *The Comic Weekly Man*, although he remained uncredited for the role by his choice. He did all the voices except for the female voices, doing many different dialects and accents.

One role that stood out in Clark's mind was a program that aired during World War II and was sponsored by the Catholic Church. It featured programs about men in the service. He was asked to portray Lt. O'Shay who served in the Navy, and whose ship was sunk with him on board. Prior to the voyage, Lt. O'Shay had written a letter to his son, which was published in newspapers across the country. It was a very emotional Lon Clark who read the letter for the broadcast. The director approached him later, thanking him for saving the show. Ironically, this was the same director who had told the young Lon Clark that "radio can do without you."

In 1956, Clark would return to the stage, replacing Jason Robards in the Broadway production of Eugene O'Neill's *Long Day's Journey into Night*. He would continue to work on stage and in television until the 1960s. He remained active on radio in episodes of *CBS Mystery Theater* into the 1970s.

Clark was married to Michelle Trudeau and they had two sons, Lon Jr. and Stephen – all who survived him. Clark passed away on October 2, 1998, in Manhattan, New York. He was 86.