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Talk of the Town

by Jim Hazard

I discovered "Vic and Sade" in my grandmother's kitchen. For 15 minutes every weekday afternoon she would pause in her war on dust and fingerprints to sit with a cup of tea and tune her radio to the folks who lived in "the small house halfway up in the next block." I remember her wiping away tears of laughter with her flowered apron, and how we talked about Vic and Sade Gook and their family as if they were our family.

I was too young then, in the early 1940s, to appreciate the artistry of the show's creator, Paul Rhymer. I just knew it was a funny show that both my grandmother and I could enjoy together. Rhymer was a Bloomington native and Illinois Wesleyan alumnus who drew on his Midwestern upbringing to create characters so real that, in the 1930s and '40s, they truly did become America's daytime-radio family. It wasn't until years later that I realized the depth of Rhymer's talent—and the excellence of my grandmother's sense of humor.



Photo courtesy The Pantagraph

When humorist Paul Rhymer '28 broadcast the voices of Bloomington across America, he made radio history. Now that history is being rediscovered.

Rhymer was by most estimates the finest writer of radio's Golden Age—those years from the late '20s to the mid '40s, before television became the living room's entertainment centerpiece. Through the years 1932 to 1944, "Vic and Sade" ran 15 minutes a day, five days a week, slotted into daytime programming among the soap operas, so it was called "an oasis of cheer in an ocean of sorrows." It was voted the number-one daytime program in 1942, enjoyed by seven million daily listeners. Its admirers included such literary heavyweights as James Thurber, Ray Bradbury, John O'Hara, and Sherwood Anderson. *Time Magazine* was even moved to declare Rhymer the successor to Mark Twain.

Even accounting for *Time's* occasional flights of hyperbole, there is some truth in the estimate. Rhymer was a humorist of the Heartland, one who may have left for the big city but who never looked back at his roots with scorn or snobbishness. His Bloomington, like Twain's Hannibal, Missouri, was a beloved, lifelong source of material, small in size but rich in humanity.

Rhymer was born in Fulton, Illinois, in 1905, but he did not tarry long there (his words). At the age of one week he became a Bloomington resident, and eventually a student of the Bloomington schools, and finally a student and Sigma Chi at IWU. Rhymer noted that a highlight of his years at Illinois Wesleyan was in 1925, when he set what he guessed might be a collegiate record by having four dates in the same day.

Unfortunately, Paul did not graduate from IWU. This was not the result of too many four-date days, but rather the need to make a living and help support his mother following his father's

death. He worked for the Chicago and Alton Railroad (a line that's often mentioned in his scripts), drove a cab, and worked briefly for the Bloomington *Pantagraph*, where his career as a creative writer got its big start. At least, that's one way of looking at his *Pantagraph* misadventures. In fact, Paul was fired from the paper for printing interviews with people he had not interviewed—and, in some cases, people who did not even exist. It may have made for swell reading, but there are some newspapers that look down on the practice. Exit Rhymer.

In 1929, an IWU connection, Thornton McLaughry, lured him to Chicago and the continuity department of NBC Radio, headquartered in the downtown Merchandise Mart. Writing "continuity" for radio meant composing station breaks or the snappy introductions to live broadcasts of the big bands from downtown hotels: *And now Glenn Miller and the boys will get us all...In the Mood.*

While writing station breaks doesn't sound like much, the time and place were perfect for a writer with Rhymer's talent. It is no exaggeration to say, as New Orleans was to the birth of jazz, Chicago was to the birth of radio. A new phenomenon was being launched in that huge building in the Windy City: "script radio." Instead of preachers, hotel dance bands, tap dancers, or news broadcasts, the idea was to present something like a play on the radio, a sort of movie or stage play for the ear. A theatre for stay-at-homes, one you could peel carrots or iron clothes during, and all the while enjoy the same thrills or laughs or tears that stage and screen offered.

It was a brand-new field and there were few writers who understood the idea of a theatre purely for the ear. Paul Rhymer was born for it. He instinctively understood that the most winning appeal to the ear wasn't sound effects or melodramatic voice-over descriptions—it was the commonest of all our resources. It was talk, pure and simple.

That pure and simple talk became the be-all and end-all of his remarkable success as a scriptwriter and humorist. The "Vic and Sade" family was a blend of four voices, like the classic string quartet. There were the two adults, the Vic and Sade of the title: he tending to be windy and overimpressed by his own eloquence, she slangy and not so impressed by "funny, funny mans." And there were two "non-adults": their son Rush and his scatterbrained Uncle Fletcher, king of the irrelevant anecdote. Each character had a distinctive style of speaking—a vocabulary, not just a tone of voice—that was unmistakable.

Five days a week, this quartet annoyed, interrupted, misunderstood, and loved one another in the language of the Heartland. A few titles tell how far removed these gentle "plots" were from entanglements and distresses of the soaps that preceded and followed "Vic and Sade" in the afternoon lineup: "Vic Explains How a Doorbell Rings," "Rush Charts His Future to the Year 2000," and "Sade's House Is Not the Way She Left It."

Paul Rhymer may have left Bloomington to seek his fortune, but he took Bloomington with him, and Bloomington became his fortune. The man who created "Vic and Sade" knew full well that he himself was born, raised, and educated by the Vics and Sades of his native ground. Radio's Home Folks, as the Gook family became known, talked and talked to one another in the privacy of their small house, their conversations straddling the border between common sense and lunacy that predated the theatre of Beckett and Pinter. It is Theatre of the Absurd made of affection

instead of alienation and despair. In the smallest of our small talk, Rhymer showed daily, we hold to our eccentricities, and we fumble toward tolerating our loved ones' oddities. We become almost noble there in the small house halfway up in the next block.

It's important to note here that, in all those years of five-scripts-a-week (a total of 3,500 stories), Paul Rhymer was the one and only writer of "Vic and Sade." Each morning at 9:00 he sat at his rented typewriter and began the day's story. He made certain he had the ending he was writing towards in mind before he began, and then the trick, he said, was to let the family talk its way to that ending. His job was to make sure that their 12 minutes of talk was true to character and as entertaining as possible. "Wheels within wheels" was how Rhymer described the rhythm of conversation he aimed for, so that the Gooks' low-keyed, unmelodramatic lives remained as vivid and interesting to the listeners as their own daily lives.

When the script was complete he delivered it personally to the Merchandise Mart studios to be copied and distributed to the actors. The script was ready for rehearsal and broadcast, and Rhymer was off to enjoy the rest of his day, till his 9:00 encounter with the typewriter the next morning.

Billy Idelson, who played Rush, said that the first time he laid eyes on one of Rhymer's scripts he knew he was involved in something unique. Idelson went on to write and direct such classic television comedies as "The Bob Newhart Show," "Love American Style," and "Bewitched"—and, in the decades since "Vic and Sade," nothing has changed his opinion. "The more I see comedy scripts, the more I am in awe of what Paul did," Idelson once told an interviewer.

It comes as no surprise that Paul Rhymer was regarded as something of a hero in the hometown that was a model for his most memorable scripts. Although the town where Vic and Sade lived was called "Crooper, Illinois," Bloomington residents recognized the names of streets, neighbors, and even telephone exchanges that Rhymer used in the program.

Rhymer was the classic example of Local Boy Makes Good, and so on April 28, 1938, Bloomington celebrated Paul Rhymer Day. The native son returned home, accompanied by the actors who played Vic, Sade, and Rush. They were greeted by the Bloomington High School band at the train station and the day's activities included a key-to-the-city presentation, a dinner for 700 at the Scottish Rite Temple, and a live performance of "Vic and Sade." The key to the city was a very small one, for as Mayor Hayes remarked "we are a small city." The local Western Union office was kept busy handling the congratulatory messages from such radio celebrities as Fibber McGee, Don Ameche, Rudy Valle, and radio's most famous ventriloquist dummy, Charlie McCarthy.

Of course, success in the entertainment business can last only so long. After an impressive run of a dozen years, "Vic and Sade" went off the air in 1944. The next year there was a brief and unsuccessful attempt to revive it as a half-hour program with a live audience, but it was time for Rhymer to move on to other projects. In the years before his death in 1964, he became a successful book reviewer and free-lance writer, and then in the early 1950s moved into the new medium of television, writing a comedy series called "The Public Life of Cliff Norton." But his greatest work had been done. Sad to say, he did that work in the impermanent medium of radio,

and so it has been largely forgotten by the general public in a way it would not have been had Rhymer written for the stage or screen.

Still, there are those old and new fans who will not let "Vic and Sade" disappear altogether. Through books, audio recordings, and even the Internet (see sidebar), the genius of Paul Rhymer remains available to the connoisseur of fine humor.

This past February, Illinois Wesleyan joined in the Rhymer preservation movement. Alpha Eta Pi, IWU's chapter of Sigma Tau Delta, the international English honor society, devoted an evening to his work. Two of Rhymer's scripts were performed to an audience of students, faculty, and townspeople at Evelyn Chapel. The old scripts were given new voices by Alyssa DeCesari '02 and Jessica Montgomerie '02 (who also directed the performance), and by English professor Robert Bray and theatre professor Jared Brown, himself a radio actor as a child and son of one of the great comic voice actors in radio history.

Following that first-rate performance, I was invited to talk to the audience for a few minutes about the man who'd written the scripts they'd just enjoyed, about his connection to the campus and the community, and about his special place in the history of American humor. Well, I was used to talking about the joys of "Vic and Sade" after hearing it—I'd learned that in my grandmother's kitchen years ago. But, you might ask, wasn't all this mere nostalgia, an attempt to resurrect a faded glory? Haven't the changing times left the Gooks and their creator behind?

The answer to that impertinent question came from the echoes of laughter in the Evelyn Chapel that wintry February evening. And better yet, from a moment at the afternoon rehearsal. A technician from the campus radio station WESN was on hand to tape a rehearsal performance for eventual broadcast. He wore the obligatory headphones and was very busy, very techie about the whole project. But gradually he couldn't help himself. He became a listener. A script over 60 years old had come home to Bloomington, and a young man who knew nothing about it now knew all there was to know about it. He was laughing out loud at the timeless world of Rhymer.

About the author: Jim Hazard teaches non-fiction writing and current literature at the University of Wisconsin-Milwaukee and is a frequent contributor to Milwaukee Magazine. He also teaches radio-history courses in Elderhostels, "which gave me some focus and someone to talk to about this enthusiasm," he says, adding, "I am mainly interested in the popular arts—especially those instances when we achieve the highest common denominator, rather than the lowest."