
BOOK REVIEW



PHARMACY AND MEDICINE ON THE AIR. Mickey C. Smith.
Metuchen, NJ and London: Scarecrow Press, Inc., 1989.

This small but robust book should be read by every pharmacist. Why? Pharmacists over 50 should read it for amusement, information, and nostalgia; younger pharmacists should read it for amusement and information, and perhaps for a different perspective of the profession than that provided in most pharmacy curricula today.

Readers should begin with the acknowledgments and foreword. The rest of the book is divided into six parts (plus bibliography): "Pharmacy and Radio: 1935-1960" (a prologue); "Major Pharmacy Characters on Radio"; "Minor Pharmacy Characters on Radio"; "Medicine and Nursing on Radio"; "The Sponsors"; and "The End of Radio Drama, Variety and Comedy" (epilogue).

The first section introduces radio as it began to flourish and describes pharmacy just before it was about to be transformed into its modern character. The symbiosis of radio and commerce, including pharmaceutical commercials, is illustrated by an overview of the infamous Dr. Brinkley on the radio and the public relations radio campaign by *American Druggist*. The cultural aspect of radio is also briefly introduced.

The next section treats five major characters and pharmacy settings in order of importance, based on a combination of the emphasis on the pharmacist, especially in a favorable light, and series

longevity. The first, "County Seat," ran from November 1938 to February 1939, yet 36 pages are devoted to the lovable character "Doc" Hackett. Of particular interest is the fact that the show's writer, Milton Geiger, was a pharmacist who practiced pharmacy with his brother, especially during the early part of his writing career. His first credit was a minidrama featuring a pharmacist. Entitled "One Special For Doc," it was aired as a part of the Rudy Vallee Hour. This single script launched Geiger into a brilliant writing career that included many well-known radio programs. Doc Hackett was the kind of pharmacist we all should emulate in ingenuity, integrity, and humanity. There is plenty of humor in his character as well.

The second pharmacist-character, Richard Q. Peavey, R.Ph., was the Great Gildersleeve's pharmacist. The show, a spin-off of the "Fibber McGee and Molly" show, ran from 1941 to 1958. Peavey is presented in a much less favorable light than "Doc" Hackett. Mr. Fowler was the first pharmacist, probably not meant to be a permanent character, and he was later followed by Peavey. The actor, Richard LeGrand, made the statement, "Well, now I wouldn't say that" famous (old-timers will remember), and it became his byword. The genesis of that expression will be very amusing for some, downright hilarious for others.

The third major use of pharmacy is Kremer's Drugstore, which is featured as a setting for the show "Fibber McGee and Molly" much more frequently than its owner, Ed Kremer, appears. According to the author, Ed Kremer was not a very likeable character. Fibber and Molly were on the air from 1935 to 1959, and Kremer's Drugstore made its debut in November 1937. Several actors played Ed Kremer, including well-known actors Ed Begley and William Conrad.

Pharmacy and pharmacists "returned to respectability" with the "Phil Harris and Alice Faye Show: The Rexall Family Druggist" in 1949 and 1950. This short-lived show had class, as did its commercials, according to the author. I would agree; I have known more than one real-life Rexall family druggist who was proud of and had confidence in Rexall products due in part, no doubt, to these and similar commercials. The show was very funny. The commercials

were dignified, except for well-planted jokes with Rexall as the butt, yet even these were not ridiculous.

Another pharmacist (as a major character, yet "obscure" in Smith's words) was Pete May, who played in the "Family Doctor" show. The show ran for 39 episodes, probably in 1939. Pete May was not an all-American pharmacist.

The minor pharmacist characters included Homer Willoughby, R.Ph., Dennis Day's pharmacist; Mr. Feathers, R.Ph. (only two recordings exist); Julius Caesar Jones, R.Ph., "Great Caesar's Ghost"; Mr. Fudd, R.Ph., the "Archie Andrews" pharmacist; and the characters in Doc Fickett's drugstore. Fourteen radio shows are listed as having mentioned a pharmacist or pharmacy or having used pharmacy as a theme in one or more episodes (pp. 97-100). Eight advertisements of over-the-counter (OTC) drug products of the era, directed at pharmacists, appeared in the *American Druggist* and are shown between pp. 92 and 93.

The section on medicine and nursing was of lesser interest, but still informative. The section on the sponsors is basically a chronology-tabulation of the sponsors, plus a critique of the radio advertisements of OTC drugs of the era. Smith uses Peter Morell's book, *Poisons, Potions and Profits*, as the vehicle for his critique, and wisely so.

The final section, "The End of Radio Drama, Variety and Comedy," provides the philosophical dimension of the book, albeit a brief one. Smith compares the characters in radio with real pharmacists of the era. He does not say that pharmacists in the 1930s and 1940s, and possibly the 1950s, generally were better satisfied with their calling than more recent pharmacy graduates, but I believe this to be the case. I agree with Smith that during this era radio was primarily for entertainment and, to a lesser extent, for information (except for news). The cultural impact of radio, I would agree, is difficult to assess, but I would vote it to have been more positive than negative. The author does not link pharmacy in radio with the medicine show of the more distant past nor with the current treatment of pharmacy by television. I think the connections are real and a part of our social history.

The book was meant to entertain all readers, bring back memories for some, and provide another perspective of pharmacy for oth-

ers; it does all three very, very well. I recommend the book as an adjunct text for a course covering the history of pharmacy or serving as an introduction or orientation to pharmacy practice.

Harry A. Smith, Ph.D.
University of Kentucky