

# America's Favorite Clown

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**Richard Bernard “Red” Skelton** was an American comedian who was best known as a top radio and television star from 1937 to 1971. His show business career began in his teens as a circus clown and went on to vaudeville, Broadway, films, radio, TV, clubs and casinos, while pursuing another career as a painter.

Born in Vincennes, Indiana, on July 18, 1913, Red Skelton was the son of a Hagenbeck-Wallace Circus clown named Joe who died in 1913 shortly before the birth of his son. Red Skelton himself got one of his earliest tastes of show business with the same circus as a teenager. Before that, however, he had been given the show business bug at age ten by entertainer Ed Wynn, who spotted him selling newspapers in front of the Pantheon Theatre, in Vincennes, Indiana, trying to help his family. After buying every newspaper in Red's stock, Wynn took the boy backstage and introduced him to every member of the show with which he was traveling. By age 15, Red Skelton had hit the road full-time as an entertainer, working everywhere from medicine shows and vaudeville to burlesque, showboats, minstrel shows and circuses. While performing in Kansas City in 1930, Skelton met and married his first wife, Edna Stillwell. The couple divorced 13 years later, but they remained cordial enough that Edna remained one of his chief writers.

Skelton caught his big break in two medias at once: radio and film. In 1938 he made his film debut for RKO Radio Pictures, in the supporting role of a camp counselor in *Having Wonderful Time*, Two short subjects followed for Vitaphone in 1939: *Seeing Red* and *The Bashful Buckaroo*. Skelton was hired by Metro-Goldwyn-Mayer to lend comic relief to its *Dr. Kildare* medical dramas, but soon he was starring in comedy features and in Technicolor musicals. When Skelton signed his long-term contract with MGM in 1940, he insisted on a clause that permitted him to star in not only radio but on television, which was still in its early years; The studio chief agreed to the terms, only to regret it years later when television became a serious threat to the motion picture industry.

In 1945, he married Georgia Davis; the couple had two children, Richard and Valentina; Richard's childhood death of leukemia devastated the household. Red and Georgia divorced in 1971. Georgia continued in her role as Red's manager until the 1960s. In 1976, Georgia committed suicide by gunshot. Deeply affected by the loss of his ex-wife, Red would abstain from performing for the next decade and a half, finding solace only in painting clowns.

On October 07, 1941, Skelton premiered his own radio show, *The Raleigh Cigarette Program*, developing routines involving a number of recurring characters, including punch-drunk boxer Cauliflower McPugg, inebriated Willy Lump-Lump and "mean widdle kid" Junior, whose favorite phrase ("I dood it!") became part of the American phrasology. That, along with "He bwoke my widdle arm!" and "He don't know me vewy well, do he?" all found their way into various Warner Bros. Cartoons

There was con man San Fernando Red with his pair of crosseyed seagulls, Gertrude and Heathcliffe, and singing cabdriver Clem Kadiddlehopper, a country bumpkin with a big heart and a slow wit.

Skelton was drafted in March 1944, and the popular series was discontinued June 06, 1944. Shipped overseas to serve with an Army entertainment unit as a private, Skelton led an exceptionally hectic military life: in addition to his own duties and responsibilities, he was always being summoned to entertain officers late at night. The perpetual motion and lack of rest resulted in a nervous breakdown in Italy. He spent three months in a hospital and was discharged in September 1945.

On December 04, 1945, *The Raleigh Cigarette Program* resumed where it left off with Skelton introducing some new characters, including Bolivar Shagnasty and J. Newton Numbskull. Lurene Tuttle and Verna Felton appeared as Junior's mother and grandmother. The series ended May 20, 1949, and that fall he moved to CBS.

In 1951, NBC beckoned Skelton to bring his radio show to television. His characters worked even better on screen than on radio; television also provoked him to create his second best-remembered character, Freddie the Freeloader, a traditional tramp whose appearance suggested the elder brother of the Ringling Brothers and Barnum & Bailey Circus clown Emmett Kelly.

When Red complained about the pressures of doing a live show, NBC agreed to film his shows in the 1952-53 season. Declining ratings prompted NBC to cancel his show in the spring of 1953. Beginning with the 1953-54 season, Skelton began doing his shows for CBS, where he remained until 1970. Skelton's personal problems, including heavy drinking, as well as disappointing ratings lead to near failure. An appearance on the *Ed Sullivan Show* apparently was the beginning of a turnaround for Skelton's television career; he quit his drinking and recognized that he did have loyal fans. His ratings at CBS began to improve.

Many of Skelton's television shows have survived due to films, and videotapes and have been featured in recent years on PBS television stations. In addition, a number of excerpts from Skelton's television shows have been released on home video in both VHS and DVD formats.

Besides Freddie the Freeloader, Skelton's other television characters included Cauliflower McPugg, Clem Kaddiddlehopper, the Mean Widdle Boy, Sheriff Deadye, and San Fernando Red. Sometimes, during the sketches, Skelton would break up or cause his guest stars to laugh, not only on the live telecasts but the taped programs as well.

Skelton's weekly signoff -- "Good night and may God bless" -- became as familiar to television viewers as Walter Cronkite's "And that's the way it is".

Quite literally at the height of Skelton's popularity, his son was diagnosed with leukemia. In 1957 this was a virtual death sentence for any child. The illness and subsequent death of Richard Skelton at age 13 left Skelton unable to perform for much of the 1957-1958 television season. The show continued with guest hosts that included a very young Johnny Carson. CBS management was exceptionally understanding of Red's situation and no talk of cancellation was ever entertained by the CBS president. Skelton would seemingly turn on CBS and after his show was cancelled by the network in 1970.

Skelton was inducted into the International Clown Hall of Fame in 1989, but he was more than an interpretive clown. One of his best-known routines was "The Pledge of Allegiance," in which he explained the pledge word by word. Another Skelton staple, a pantomime of the crowd at a small town parade as the American flag passes by, reflected Skelton's essentially conservative, rural, Americana tastes.

Skelton frequently used the art of pantomime for his characters, using few props. He had a hat that he would use for his various bits, a floppy fedora that he would quickly mold into whatever shape was needed for the moment.

Skelton kept his high television ratings into 1970, but he ran into two problems with CBS: he no longer appealed to younger viewers, and his contracted annual salary raises grew disproportionately thanks to inflation. Since CBS had earlier decided to keep another longtime favorite, *Gunsmoke*. It's possible that without Skelton's inflationary contract raises he might have been kept on the air a few more years. However, between 1970 and 1971, CBS moved away from its traditional weekly variety shows hosted by veterans Skelton, Jackie Gleason and Ed Sullivan. Red moved to NBC in 1971 for one season in a half-hour Monday night version of his show, then ended his long television career after being canceled by that network.

Skelton returned to live performance after his television days ended, in nightclubs and casinos and resorts, as well as performing such venues as Carnegie Hall. Many of those shows yielded segments that were edited into part of the *Funny Faces* video series on HBO's Standing Room Only. He also spent more time on his lifetime love of painting, usually of clown images, and his works began to attract prices over \$80,000.

Red married for a third and last time in 1983 to the much younger Lothian Toland. She continues to maintain a website and business selling Skelton memorabilia and art prints.

Near the end of his life, Skelton said his daily routine included writing a short story a day. He collected the best stories in self-published chapbooks. He also composed music which he sold to background music services such as Muzak. Among his more notable compositions was his patriotic "Red's White and Blue March."

Red Skelton died in a hospital in Palm Springs, California of pneumonia on September 17, 1997. He was 84 years old. At the time of his death, he lived in Anza, California. He is buried in Forest Lawn Memorial Park Cemetery in Glendale, California.

The Red Skelton Bridge spans the Wabash River and provides the highway link between Illinois and Indiana on U.S. Route 50, near his hometown of Vincennes, Indiana.

At a cost of \$16.8 million, the historic Vincennes Pantheon Theater was renovated and became the Red Skelton Performing Arts Center on the Vincennes University campus. It was officially dedicated on February 24, 2006. The building includes an 850-seat theater, classrooms, rehearsal rooms and dressing rooms. The grand foyer is a gallery for Red Skelton paintings, statues and film posters. In addition to Vincennes University theatrical and musical productions, the theater hosts special events, convocations and conventions. Work is underway on the Red Skelton Gallery and Education Center to house the \$3 million collection of Skelton memorabilia donated by Lothian Skelton.

In 2002 during the controversy over the phrase "under God," which had been added to U.S. Pledge of Allegiance in 1954, a recording of a monologue Skelton performed on his 1969 television show resurfaced. In the speech, he commented on the meaning of each phrase of the Pledge. At the end, he added: "Wouldn't it be a pity if someone said that is a prayer and that would be eliminated from schools too?" Given that Constitution advocates were arguing that the inclusion of "under God" in a pledge recited daily in U.S. public schools violated the First Amendment separation of church and state, Skelton suddenly regained popularity among religious conservatives who wanted the phrase to remain.

Brother Skelton was raised a Master Mason in Vincennes Lodge No. 1 in Vincennes, Indiana on September 20, 1939, and became a Scottish Rite Mason in the Valley of Evansville a year later, where he received the 33rd degree in 1969.

Aside from his membership in Vincennes Lodge No. 1, he held membership in both the Scottish and York Rite Bodies. He was the recipient of the General Grand Chapter's Gold Medal for Distinguished Service in the Arts and Sciences. On September 24, 1969, he was coroneted an Inspector General Honorary Thirty-third Degree in Boston, Massachusetts, by the Northern Masonic Jurisdiction of the Scottish Rite.

He also joined Al Malaikah Temple on May 16, 1941 in Los Angeles, California, and he received the Grand Lodge Award of Gold from the Grand Lodge of Indiana in 1993.

Ill. Richard B. "Red" Skelton, 33° joined the elite list of Gourgas Medalists. Sovereign Grand Commander Robert O. Ralston, 33°, at a news conference in Reno, Nevada, made the presentation on July 14, 1995 prior to the opening of an art show of Ill. Brother Skelton's paintings. In making the presentation, Grand Commander Ralston pointed out that the Gourgas Medal is the highest honorary decoration offered by the Scottish Rite Supreme Council in the Northern Jurisdiction. Since the first presentation to Brother Harry S. Truman in 1945, only 28 awards have been granted. Responding to the award before a gathering of nearly 100 media representatives and guests, Red relayed the story of his first encounter with Freemasonry. He said that he was only a young boy when he met a Mason who was kind and considerate to him. He asked about the man's lapel pin and learned that it was Masonic. When the man asked him what he was doing downtown, Red told him that he was trying to find a job so he could buy his mother an Easter present. The man then gave Red \$5 and said, "I'm going to help you out". From that moment on, Red said, I told myself I was going to try and be a Mason.

Red Skelton has wholeheartedly been behind the Shriner's Hospitals for many, many years. Most of the Hospitals have received his clown artwork and have it displayed for all to enjoy. Through his skits and artwork, the clowns of the International Shrine Clown Association have been inspired. No matter where you go across North America, clowns of the ISCA are doing their version of Red's comedy work.

A lot of Red's donated artwork, books, memorabilia, music, etc, have been auctioned in some fashion or other, with the proceeds contributing to the ISCA Sneaker Fund of which Noble Red is an Honorary Member. The International Shrine Clown Association has been in the habit of contributing over \$250,000 every year to the Shriner's Hospital Research Program through the Sneaker Fund.

Red Skelton was a great entertainer, a genuine person and a true and faithful Brother Mason. I end this writing in the famous closing words of Red Skelton.

**Good nite, Good bye and God Bless.**

## References:

- Book - "Red Skelton" by Arthur Marx
- Book - "Seeing Red: The Skelton in Hollywood's Closet" by Wes D. Gehrig
- Vincennes Lodge No. 1
- The Scottish Rite Valley of Evansville