

A Reference Guide to Western Drama on the Air, 1929–1967

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BOBBY BENSON

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NAMES: *H-Bar-O Rangers*, *Bobby Benson's Adventures*, *Bobby Benson* and *Sunny Jim*
NETWORK: CBS
FORMAT: 15 minutes, 2–5 times weekly

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DURATION OF RUN: September 26, 1932, to December 11, 1936
SPONSOR: Hecker H-O Cereals
AUDIO COPIES EXTANT: None
SCRIPTS ARCHIVED: Undetermined (but two in script anthologies: Dixon, *Radio Sketches* and Lawton)
NAME: *Bobby Benson and the B-Bar-B Riders*
NETWORK: Mutual
FORMAT: Half hour, 3–5 times weekly
DURATION OF RUN: June 21, 1949, to June 17, 1955
SPONSOR: Sustained for the run, except for January to June 1951 when sponsored by Kraft
AUDIO COPIES EXTANT: 20
SCRIPTS ARCHIVED: Private collection of Jim Shean family
NAME: *Songs of the B-Bar-B*
NETWORK: Mutual
FORMAT: 5 minutes, daily on weekdays
DURATION OF RUN: December 1951 to June 1952, and possibly in 1954
SPONSOR: Chiclets and Dentyne gum
AUDIO COPIES EXTANT: 5
SCRIPTS ARCHIVED: Undetermined

This 1932 western on CBS was one of the first juvenile shows on radio, predating *The Lone Ranger*, *Tom Mix*, and *Jack Armstrong*. When its second version on Mutual ended in 1955, it had virtually outlasted every other children's series, including *Superman*, *Captain Midnight*, *Sky King* and *Straight Arrow*, thus bookending the Golden Age of Radio.

The credit for creating this durable drama goes entirely to a British immigrant who

had never been west of Detroit. Herbert C. Rice left his native England to seek his fortune in U.S. radio broadcasting in 1928 and found success in Buffalo, NY, as a director, writer, and actor. Prior to *Bobby Benson*, Rice had already created dozens of local radio drama series, including *Police Story*, *The Green Rose*, *Fearbound*, *The Cobra*, and *Cloud Trail*.

In the summer of 1932, the Hecker H-O Company of Buffalo approached Rice through its advertising agency, Erwin-Wasey, and offered to sponsor a kids' radio program to promote its cereal products. The "H-O" in their title suggested a cattle brand to Rice and he quickly drew up a story about an orphan named Bobby Benson under the guardianship of Sunny Jim. The latter character was the trade symbol for H-O cereals, a tall elderly man who resembled Ichabod Crane. In Rice's scenario, Bobby inherited a ranch in Texas called the H-Bar-O Ranch whose foreman was Buck Mason.

Hecker bought into the concept and Rice next convinced CBS to broadcast it nationally. He wrote several scripts and auditioned cast members in August 1932. An 11-year-old actor and son of a Buffalo attorney, Richard Wanamaker, won the lead. Rice, in addition to writing and directing the series, also voiced the roles of Buck Mason and Wong Lee, the Asian cook. Others in the cast were Fred Dampier and Lorraine Pankow, a local drama teacher and Rice's wife.

The series debuted on September 26, 1932, and its initial success was nothing short of phenomenal. Within a few months, the Hecker Company had to assign 12 women full-time to answer the fan mail and process the box tops of H-O Oats that arrived daily in

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exchange for premiums advertised on the show: Bobby Benson code books, cereal bowls, card games, and drinking tumblers. In addition to his microphone duties, the youthful Wanamaker, dressed up in cowboy attire, astride a pony named "Silver Spot," made personal appearances throughout the Buffalo area, all arranged by Herbert Rice. Bobby's nick-name was "The Cowboy Kid" and Rice promoted that also.

When the first season of 78 episodes ended in March 1933, CBS ordered the production moved to New York City, supposedly to ease technical problems in facilitating the national hook up. In addition, a second production with separate cast was organized in Los Angeles. The West Coast cast included George Breakstone (Bobby), Jean Darling (Polly), Lawrence Honeyman (Bart) and Muriel Reynolds (Aunt Lily).

The Manhattan cast was headed by 12-year-old Billy Halop, who not too much later, would achieve fame as the leader of the Dead End Kids on Broadway and in Hollywood. His younger sister, Florence, also an experienced juvenile actor, played Polly

Armstead on the program. Buck Mason's name was changed to Tex Mason and he was voiced by Neil O'Malley. Lorraine Pankow was the only one from the Buffalo cast that made her way to New York City and she continued her role as Aunt Lily. Humor was provided by whoever was playing Windy Wales and Diogenes Dodwaddle.

Others in that cast were Eddie Wragge, Detmar Popper (who played Sunny Jim), Joe Wilton, John Shea, Jean Sothern, Craig McDonnell (who voiced Harka, an Indian) and Walter Tetley. An 18-year-old Bert Parks was also in the cast, as was David Dixon, the son of the head writer, Peter Dixon. Most of the actors would remain in the cast until the series was cancelled in 1936. Dixon wrote all of the episodes, with the exception of the 1934-1935 season when John Battle was the scriptwriter.

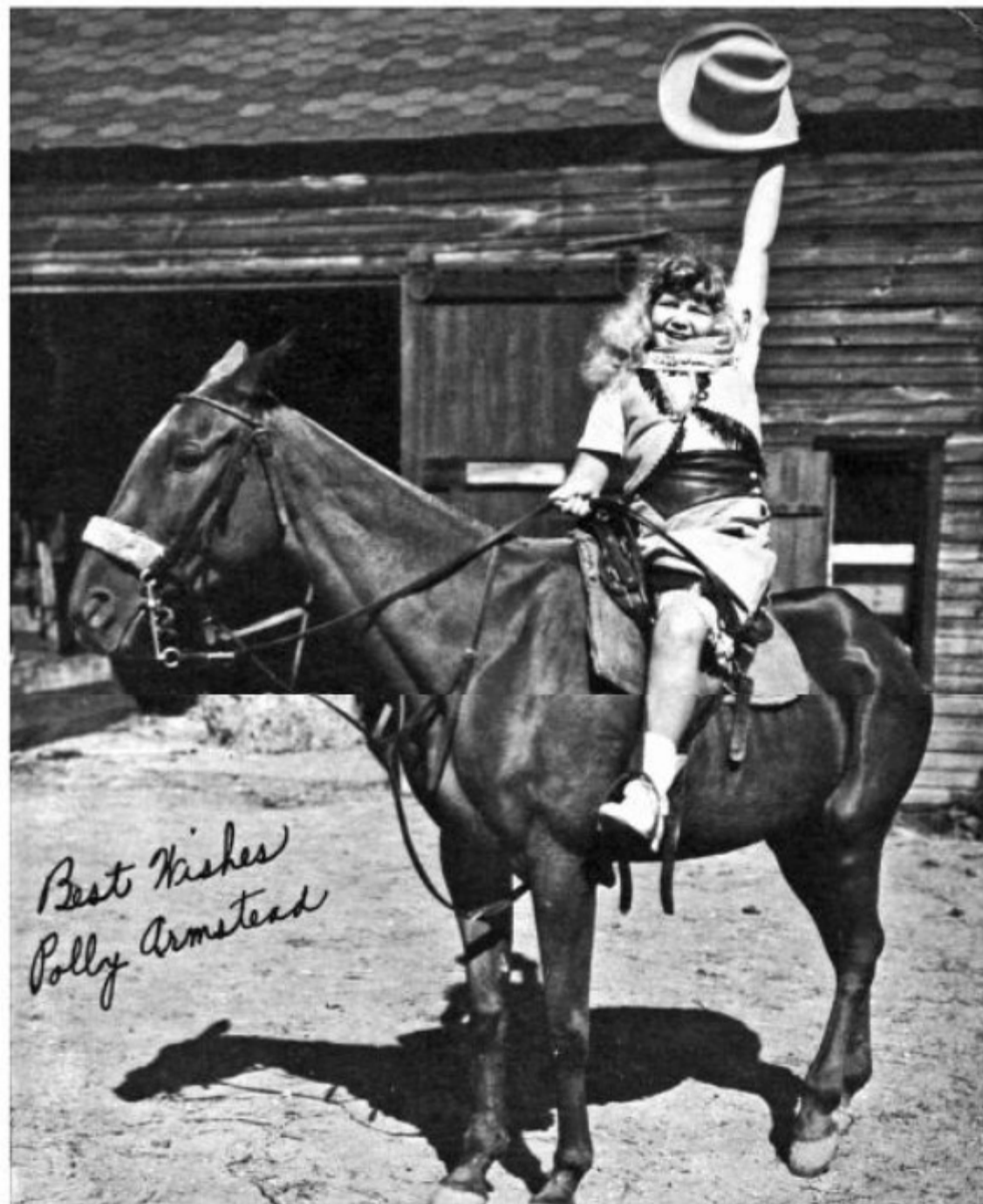
This was a modern western, in that although Bobby and his cowhands were on horseback a great deal, they also rode in automobiles and airplanes. In its promotional material the show was described as having "plenty of riding and fighting ... with Indians, Mexicans, and desperate outlaws." In the only two scripts that have been located, both in bound anthologies, the H-Bar-Rangers are preventing a jail escape in one episode and in the other, are in an airplane in a round-the-world race, with Bobby as the pilot.

Billy Halop received far more star treatment than Wanamaker did, in terms of publicity and personal appearances. Halop's photo was distributed as a radio premium and in summers he toured as Bobby Benson with the W. T. Johnson Circus Rodeo. In October 1935, he was one of the headliners in the World Championship Rodeo held in Madison Square Garden.

When Broadway beckoned, Halop left the radio show. He had won a role in "Dead End" playing a tough street kid; the rehearsals began in fall of 1935 so he gave up his Bobby Benson salary for one on the stage. Of course, the success of the dramatic play, which opened at the Belasco Theatre on October 28, 1935, kept it running until June of 1937. By that time, most of its cast, including Halop, was put under contract to make the movie version.

The departure of Halop from the leading role did not affect the popularity of *Bobby Benson* and it aired for another 16 months before it was cancelled in December 1936. Who played the lead for that last year and a half is still to be discovered.

It would be a little over a decade before *Bobby Benson* would be back on the air. But in the meantime, Hecker H-O Company continued the promotion of "The Cowboy Kid" through a series of comic strips and distribution of "Bobby Benson Money." Starting in



Best Wishes
Polly Armstead



Florence Halop as Polly Armstead from *Bobby Benson and H-Bar-O Riders*, CBS 1934 (Jack French collection).

1937 and ongoing for at least two years, there were a series of comic strips (actually paid advertisements in that format) picturing Bobby in an adventure, each one ending with him finding a treasure, winning a valuable prize, or earning a large reward. In the comic strip, Bobby would then explain to the reader that he was giving this money back to anyone who bought Hecker's cereal, two and a half cents in Bobby Benson currency in every box, which was good in any store to buy candy, ice cream, etc. These "comic strip" advertisements appeared in newspapers throughout the Northeast.

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Not until 1949 did "The Cowboy Kid" return to the airwaves for his second act. By that time Herbert Rice was a U.S. citizen working in New York City as a Vice President of the Mutual Network in charge of programming. Needing a half hour show for kids in Mutual's afternoon slot, he brought back Bobby Benson to the microphone. Unable at first to obtain a sponsor, Rice changed the name of the ranch to the B-Bar-B and trimmed down the cast to only five regulars, played by four actors. The production would use the studios of station WOR.

The versatile Craig McDonnell was again in the cast, playing both Harka and Irish with completely different voice characterizations. Ivan Cury, a talented 12-year-old with two years in the business, became the new Bobby Benson. The Tex Mason role was given to veteran performer Charles Irving. Rounding out the cast was Don Knotts, then in his mid-20s, who portrayed the old geezer, Walter Wellington "Windy" Wales. Knotts would go on later to become an Emmy Award winning actor on television.

The supporting cast had several of the best radio voices in Manhattan: Bill Zuckert, Earl George, Ross Martin, Gil Mack, Jim Boles, and his wife, Athena Lord, who played the cook, Tia Maria. In the summer of 1951, Bob Haag took over the role of Tex from Charles Irving.

A 31-year-old director, Bob Novak, was in charge, and Peter Dixon returned to write the scripts. But age and illness prevented him from keeping pace with the series and his son, David, was brought in to help. However the problem was not solved until Jim Shean

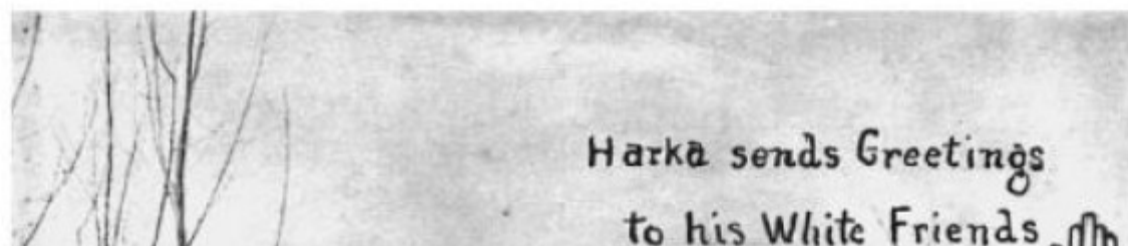
arrived. A young man and military veteran, he took over the bulk of the script writing duties, and within a year, was the sole writer.

Sound effects were handled by Jim Goode, with occasional assistance from Barney Beck. One of Barney's duties was to scour Manhattan's produce district in order to obtain free crates and boxes to be later crushed to replicate the sound of a smashed door, broken fence, and shattered chair. There were plenty of gun shots on the show, so blank pistols were not practicable. WOR had provided a firing mechanism, a small metal box holding a number of blank cartridges, which could be fired electronically in sequence.

Animal sounds (horses, cows, dogs, mountain lions, etc.) were all voiced by Frank Milano. He had started doing animal sounds on stage with USO troupes and later found success in Hollywood voicing cartoons, including that of *Mighty Mouse*. Milano soon became one of the best in the business, doing both humorous characterizations, i.e. "Pepito Mosquito" and the very realistic animals sounds on the *B-Bar-B Ranch*. There he voiced Bobby's horse, Amigo, his dog, Hero, and Windy's pet skunk, Honeysuckle, in addition to cows, chickens, wolves, and an occasional cougar.

The announcers varied over the years: first Bob Emerick, then Bucky Cosgrove, and finally, and the longest one, "Cactus" Carl Warren. John Gart was the musical director and the program's theme song was "Westward Ho," a composition by Hugo Reisenfeld, written for the 1923 silent film, *The Covered Wagon*. The music was played different ways over the years as Mutual gradually clamped down on the budget. At first three live musicians were used, then merely an organist (either John Gart or Ernestine Holmes) and finally, just a transcription disk.

The series was successful and Mutual alternated it with a West Coast show, *Straight Arrow*, in the same time slot every other weekday. In an attempt to find a sponsor for the show, Rice sent Ivan Cury out to several personal appearances, including large department stores who were selling B-Bar-B merchandise, various festivals, and even the Macy's





Craig McDonnell dressed as Harka in a publicity shot for *Bobby Benson and the H-Bar-O Riders*, CBS, 1934 (Jack French collection).

Day Parade. But when Rice tried to send Ivan overseas (the show was very popular on Armed Forces Radio Service) his mother refused.

Rice then corralled a juvenile singer, Robert J. McKnight, put him in B-Bar-B attire, and sent him on a 10 day tour of NATO countries. Thereafter McKnight handled most of the personal appearances of "Bobby Benson" in the U.S. while Ivan continued to handle all the radio duties.

In early 1951, Ivan left the B-Bar-B for a better paying job on *Portia Faces Life* and

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more freelance work on network radio. McKnight was pressed into service in the WOR studio as the next Bobby Benson. While a good singer, he lacked radio experience, and soon, as his voice started to squeak into maturity, another replacement was sought.

Rice looked no farther than next door in Stamford, CT, where his nephew and niece lived with their parents; their father was Rice's brother who had followed him to the U.S. the prior year. Clive Rice, 10-years-old, was a fine singer, and after some diction lessons to "Americanize" his accent, he auditioned for the role under the professional name that Rice gave him, "Clyde Campbell." He got the job and became the new "Cowboy Kid."

Clive and his parents did not object to the personal appearances so Rice extended the range to include state fairs and related events in Florida, Iowa, South Dakota, and Indiana. Sometimes Clive would be accompanied by Don Knotts as Windy and a country singer, Tex Fletcher who would portray Tex Mason. But whether or not they came on the tour, Clive was always chaperoned by Rice's executive assistant, Mary Jane Williams, who was disguised as his "tutor" in press releases.

This radio series was sponsored by Kraft Foods, usually promoting its candy, for the first six months of 1951. This turned out to be bad news for Clive since he was almost



Clive Rice (professional name Clyde Campbell) in 1952 publicity shot as *Bobby Benson* (Jack French collection).

always expected to ride a horse at these promotional events and parades. The sponsor routinely passed out samples of its Kraft caramels to the kids so the mischievous juvenile attendees would throw the caramels at Clive's horse, frequently startling the animal and making it difficult for Clive to control him.

Some of the more serious moments for Clive and Mary Jane were their visits to schools, churches and hospitals. At one Midwestern hospital, one of the young patients was immobile in his bed and his eyes glistened with wonder as he talked to his hero. "Can I hold your pistol?" he asked earnestly. When Mary Jane nodded assent, Clive took his toy pistol out of its holster and extended it to the patient, whose frail fingers closed around it. The two boys chatted briefly and it was time to go to the next personal appearance so Mary Jane slowly extracted the six-gun from the patient's hand and put it back in Clive's holster as they departed. A nurse caught up with them and whispered to Mary Jane, "That's the first time he's executed any physical motion since he came to this hospital months ago."

Jim Shean continued to write the scripts and filled them with exciting tales of robberies, prairie fires, escaped convicts, wild horses, cattle rustling and border smuggling. For a change of pace, Shean asked Novak, the director, if he could write occasional humorous episodes, and after some discussion, they agreed that Shean could write every third

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Bobby Benson Reunion at SPERDVAC circa 1994, from left: Don Knotts (Windy Wales); Bob Novak, director; Ivan Cury (Bobby Benson); and Jim Shean, head writer (Jack French collection).

program as a comedy. While the shows still had excitement and danger, they were funny. Usually the comedy episodes featured Windy Wales and his misadventures included getting the lead in a stage play of "Cyrano," being mistaken by a gang for a fugitive killer, and having an unwelcome suitor track him to the B-Bar-B when a lonely hearts club mixed up the mail.

Live radio always held the potential for accidents, which had to be quickly fixed. One such incident occurred when Clive's younger sister had come to attend the rehearsal and the live show. Just as the On the Air sign lit up, Clive developed a sudden nose bleed and when he held his head up, he couldn't see his script. His sister grabbed his script and joined the cast at the microphone. She delivered all his lines without a mistake until his nose bleed was contained and he could resume the role. Since her voice sounded so much like his, no one in the radio audience noticed the switch.

In December 1951 the makers of Dentyne and Chiclets approached the *Bobby Benson* team and asked about sponsorship. They said that while they could not afford to sponsor a full half hour show; they could do so only if the program was very short. Rice accepted their offer and a spinoff was created called *Songs of the B-Bar-B* which was only 5 minutes in length, including commercials.

Jim McMenney was in charge of producing these programs, including writing and directing. Most of them were done in his studio on transcription disks, usually recording up to a dozen in the same session. Each consisted of one western song from Clive and another by Tex Fletcher, with a "tall tale" by Don Knotts as Windy between the two songs. The duration of the run of this mini-series is not confirmed but it appears that it aired for several months in 1951 to 1952 with perhaps limited re-runs in 1954.

In addition to the various merchandizing items related to *Bobby Benson and the B-Bar-B Riders*, there were 20 issues of a Bobby Benson comic book published from 1951 to 1953. Both Ivan and Clive as “Bobby Benson” were the subjects of many articles in entertainment periodicals, including appearances on the respective covers. In 1954 *Air Trails Magazine*, promoted a contest to build the best model of the B-Bar-B ranch house, with the first prize winner getting a gold mine claim and a one month trip to Deadwood, SD. Even though the majority of entrants were young boys, it was a 12-year-old girl, Nancy Nibler, who was the first place winner.

In 1953, the Australian company, Grace Gibson Productions, recorded one audition episode of *Bobby Benson* entitled “The Ghost Rustlers” with an all-Australian cast. This episode begins with a brief retelling of the “origin story” of Bobby Benson and follows with mysterious rustlers who make herds of cattle disappear. The attempt to market *Bobby Benson* “down under” was unsuccessful, however, and the series never aired.

Sources: Audio copies of *Bobby Benson and the B-Bar-B Riders*; Dixon; Dunning, *On the Air*; Hickerson, *4th Revised*; Personal scrapbook of Richard Wanamaker; Personal scrapbook of Clive Rice; *Radiogram*, January 2007; *Sponsor*, May 22, 1950; *Courier*, Chatham, NY, February 1, 1951; *Brooklyn Daily Eagle*, September 26, 1932; *Los Angeles Times*, October 7, 1933; *Patriot*, Fulton, NY, April 7, 1938; *Variety*, June 29, 1949.
