

# Through the Years with MIDWESTERN HAYRIDE

By **BILL McCLUSKEY**  
WLW, Cincinnati

A short time ago my old friend Bill Sachs, who has covered many of the top country shows for more years than he is willing to admit, asked me to do a nostalgic story for the World of Country Music.

I didn't know quite where to begin—Gene Autry, Lulu Belle and Scotty, Red Foley, the Girls of the Golden West, Millie and Dolly Good, Aunt Ida (Margaret Lillie) and Little Clifford, George Goebel, Bradley Kincaid, Homer and Jethro and Bonnie Lou.

Mentioning George Goebel brings to mind his first road show. George in those days was the boy cowboy star of the "National Barn Dance" and was a great show stopper with his yodeling and western songs. Earl Kurtze, WLS Artist Bureau, decided George was ready to headline a road show of which I was in charge as emcee during a school vacation, I guess he was about 14 at that time.

Well George's mother was a little worried about him going on the road, so I was called in to meet Mrs. Goebel and told by Earl Kurtze to watch over George. We left on the road show scheduled to play the Butterfield circuit in Michigan, which was big time in those days. Being George's senior by 12 or 13 years, I took my assignment seriously, George and yours truly have laughed about this since on his periodic appearances in and around Cincinnati. I guess Old Man McCluskey was a little bit too strict.

My first experience with c&w shows was in 1933, when George Biggar, then program director at WLS, Chicago, hired me to sing Scotch and Irish ballads, which I had done on Pittsburgh radio for a number of years. Biggar was responsible for the success of a lot of country and western talent and programs. In those days, he was directing the granddaddy of them all, the "WLS National Barn Dance," packing them in every Saturday night for two shows at the Eighth Street Theater, Chicago, and making personal appearances during the year at theaters, auditoriums and fairs under the able direction of Earl Kurtze and George Ferguson, who formed the WLS Artist Bureau.

Among some of the top names we remember of those days in addition to those already mentioned were Hezzie and the Hoosier Hotshots, Uncle Ezra, Mac and Bob the great singing team both of whom were blind and had to be led on and off stage, the Prairie Ramblers, The Arkansas Woodchopper, Otto and the Novolodeans, and John Lair with Slim Miller and the Cumberland Ridge Runners. This is the same John Lair who later formed the nationally known "Renfro Valley Barn Dance."

I could go on and on with contemporaries of those days like Patsy Montana, Hugh Cross, and Rube Transon and His Texas Cowboys featuring an accordion player named Buddy Ross who is still going great guns today, 30 years later with the Hometowners on the WLW "Midwestern Hayride."

In addition to working the "National Barn Dance," these personalities were also featured doing guest spots on other network shows. I remember one in particular when Millie

and Dolly and the Girls of the Golden West, were invited to appear on what was in those days one of the top radio shows in the country, the Thursday night "Fleischman Yeast Hour" conducted by Rudy Vallee.

This was in 1936 and the reason I remember so well is that Rudy Vallee paid for a duet but actually had a trio, as Millie who was and still is Mrs. William McCluskey, was pregnant with our oldest boy, Capt. Bill McCluskey. As I write this he is on his way to Vietnam to fly reconnaissance for the U. S. Army.

Winding up WLS "National Barn Dance" days would not be complete without mentioning the masters of ceremonies, Jolly Joe Kelly, of "Quiz Kid" fame, Happy Hal O'Halloran, Jack Holden and Howard Chamberlain, who still announces for WLW radio and television.

Well, enough of that era. Then came WLW and the start of John Lair's "Renfro Barn Dance" originating in Cincinnati Music Hall in September 1937, with the nucleus coming from WLS. It included Red Foley, the Girls of the Golden West and Slim Miller. To this group John brought in Aunt Ida from the vaudeville stage and created the team of Aunt Ida and Little Clifford, one of the top box-office attractions of all time in the vast area covered by WLW Radio, as we can attest as we were handling all personal appearances of the Renfro show which also included the Coon Creek Girls, the Duke of Paducah and others.

Then in 1938, WLW started its own western-country show under the direction of George Biggar whom James D. Shouse, vice-president of the then Crosley Broadcasting Corp. brought to Cincinnati from WLS Chicago. This was known as the "Boone County Jamboree" and was broadcast from Emery Auditorium in downtown Cincinnati over WLW.

In those days, the "Jamboree" featured Lazy Jim Day, Helen Diller the Canadian Cowgirl, Louise Massey and the Westerners, Merle Travis and the Drifting Pioneers, Pa and Ma McCormick and the Brown County Revelers, Lafe Harkness, Roy Starkey,



**Bill McCluskey, who began his career as booker, manager and agent of country music talent with the WLS "National Barn Dance," Chicago. In the early 1930's, McCluskey switched his allegiance to WLW, Cincinnati, where for many years he served as manager of the station's talent department and booker of WLW's "Boone County Jamboree" at fairs and celebrations, chiefly in the Midwest territory. At present, McCluskey is client service director with the Avco Broadcasting Corp., WLW's parent company, in Cincinnati.**