

Serialdom Localities Were Sometimes Set by Speech of Figures, Not Figures of Speech

by Jim Cox

It was definitely a kinder, gentler age in which most of us grew up. And while factories were humming and commerce was booming in progressive postwar America, the country's landscape was still heavily invested in farming, although a rural lifestyle that prevailed in earlier decades was fading fast. There in relatively pint-sized communities, several generations of families had invested their whole lives, acquiring trades and values while practicing both in harmony. By the 1940s and 1950s, however, America was rapidly emerging as an urbanized society. And even though more and more of us moved to a metropolis to pursue promising careers, the rural backwaters we left behind continued to influence our land and lingered in our memories even to this day.

It was just such neighborhoods with bucolic-sounding names from which so many of the radio soap operas sprang. Of about 300 yarns with enduring story lines, the vast majority was tethered in imaginary hamlets with monikers like these at their inceptions: Beechmont (*As the Twig Is Bent*), Cold River

(*Scattergood Baines*), Dickston (*The Second Mrs. Burton*), Elmwood (*Pepper Young's Family*), Fairbrooke (*Our Gal Sunday*), Fairview (*Masquerade*), Five Points (*The Guiding Light*), Glendale (*Hilltop House*), Glen Falls (*Big Sister*), Hartville (*Just Plain Bill*), Homeville (*David Harum*), Littleton (*Aunt Jenny*), Meridian (*The Right to Happiness*), Merrimac (*The Road of Life*), Parkerstown (*Portia Faces Life*), Pine River (*Valiant Lady*), Preston (*Joyce Jordan, M.D.*), Rushville Center (*Ma Perkins*), Sandy Harbor (*Ethel and Albert*), Simpsonville (*Young Widder Brown*), Springdale (*Rosemary*), Three Oaks (*Young Dr. Malone*), Three Rivers (*The Brighter Day*), and scads more.

Occasionally the stories boasted locales we were familiar with. No fewer than a score of them, for instance, were set in the environs of greater metropolitan New York: *Amos 'n' Andy*, *Backstage Wife*, *Brenda Curtis*, *Broadway Cinderella*, *The Career of Alice Blair*, *The Foxes of Flatbush*, *Front Page Farrell*, *The Goldbergs*, *Halfway to Heaven*, *Katie's Daughter*, *Little Italy*, *Manhattan Mother*, *Meet Miss Julia*, *Myrt and Marge*, *Pretty Kitty Kelly*, *Society Girl*, *The Story of Holly Sloan*, *The Story of Ruby Valentine*, *We Love and Learn*, and *Wendy Warren and the News*. In addition, *Perry Mason*—who convincingly played a municipality's attorney—frequently referred to that drama's site as “the city” without offering more specific taxonomy. Many of us thought of New York without it being spelled out. Several other washboard weepers “seemed” to be set in Gotham although their precise identity also remained unclear.

We were never in doubt, however, about those tales based in Hollywood. Listeners were offered a handful with Tinseltown connections: *The Country*

Church of Hollywood, The Girl Next Door, Molly of the Movies, Nona from Nowhere, The Romance of Helen Trent, Sally of the Talkies, and The Story of Sandra Martin.

From Washington, D. C.—a city perceived as dominated by males in that era—came a trio of drainboard dramas with heroines in their titles: *Helen Holden, Government Girl; Lora Lawton; and The Story of Mary Marlin.*

Other cities with multiple network tales emanating from their borders were Chicago (*Girl Alone, Painted Dreams, and Today's Children*) and San Francisco (*Houseboat Hannah and One Man's Family*).

Beyond them were still other recognizable locales for a few more soapy sagas: Boston (*Stella Dallas*), Louisville (*Mrs. Wiggs of the Cabbage Patch*), Miami (*The Woman in My House*), and Philadelphia (*Kitty Foyle*).

There were multiple serials whose settings were embedded within their nomenclature: *Central City, Green Valley, U.S.A., Happy Hollow, Joe Powers of Oakville, King's Row, Margo of Castlewood, Real Folks from Thompkins Corner, Snow Village Sketches, and Sweet River.*

Aside from all of this were some anecdotal notations that are worth considering.

Although not set in New York, a few of the serialized melodramas featured spouses of their heroines who discovered ample reasons to spend excessive stretches in New York City. For some that added up to several years. While a few husbands found work in the Big Apple, others were estranged from their wives, and one's three-year sojourn in Gotham was devoted to trying to find out who he was! Included were the crude inventor *Lorenzo Jones* (an amnesiac); Jerry

Malone, namesake of *Young Dr. Malone*; newspaperman Walter Manning (a fleeting amnesiac) of *Portia Faces Life*; newspaperman (and recovered amnesiac) Bill Roberts of *Rosemary*; and physician John Wayne of *Big Sister* (who had even bigger tribulations than amnesia, which he also experienced—he was struck blind, encountered a “mid-life crisis,” chased nubile young women, had a near-fatal bout with pneumonia, and sustained persistent and recurring fits of depression.) All of it was some of the substance on which the audio serials thrived.

Writing in the first of four treatises pertaining to the soap operas, this author commented on the diminutive size of the fabled villages in which those daytime dramas were rooted, observing: “In nearly two decades Aunt Jenny’s faithful listeners must have heard exposés of every citizen in the miniscule hamlet of Littleton many times over.” It was almost a foregone conclusion that that happened given the many yarns she spun.

Meanwhile, *Wendy Warren and the News*, set in Manhattan, New York, is believed to have been the only serial with a theme song in such demand by fans that it was published in sheet music form. Clarke Morgan, the show’s organist, penned the composition appropriately titled “My Home Town.”

Once asked to reveal where (*Just Plain*) Bill Davidson’s mythical Hartville was, prolific radio producer Anne Hummert replied that it was situated “somewhere in the Midwest” because “people seem to like characters from that section best.” She and her husband Frank maintained that the speech of figures from that area wasn’t identified with any one dialect that might show partiality or distract listeners. Hence a preponderance of burgs with rustic-sounding names

existed like: Brookdale (*Doc Barclay's Daughters*), Farmington (*Woman of Courage*), Forest Hills (*Kate Hopkins, Angel of Mercy*), Galesville (*The Carters of Elm Street*), High Falls (*Your Family and Mine*), Hillsdale (*Jenny Peabody*), Lonesome Hollow (*Moonshine and Honeysuckle*), Northbury (*County Seat*), Valleydale (*The Life and Love of Dr. Susan*), and Westbridge (*Those We Love*).

Daytime theorists hinted, for instance, that *Young Dr. Malone's* Three Oaks lay “somewhere between New York and Illinois.” They based their opinion on an occasional reference in the dialogue to seasonal changes as well as the prevailing preference for a “widely practiced dialect.” In no way, of course, did this limit a listener from establishing Three Oaks wherever he or she wanted it to be. That was one of the great distinctives of the Theater of the Mind.

Determining the place for the center of activity in a soap opera was important not only to the vast unseen audience tuning in but also to those on the other side of the microphone. One account, a true story, may suffice.

Elaine Sterne Carrington, who for several years penned a trio of leading daytime dramas simultaneously (*Pepper Young's Family*, *Rosemary*, *When a Girl Marries*), exhibited a matriarchal possessiveness over “her” dramas. She didn't cotton to any professed interference in how she handled them. In fact, she flaunted her ability to appall anybody that might attempt to limit or intimidate her.

One such intervention occurred with Benton & Bowles, the advertising agency supervising *When a Girl Marries* for underwriter General Foods Corporation. B&B had assembled an intricate and rather costly papier-mâché mock-up of Stanwood, the fictitious town in which Joan and Harry Davis, the

show's protagonist and her spouse, resided. Inviting Carrington to view it, agency executives proudly pointed out that their model would help them know at once if any positional errors occurred in her scripts. Carrington took it all in, giving tacit approval of the concept and then moved on.

That wasn't the end of it, however. Within a few weeks Harry—by then on the road to becoming a prosperous attorney in their community—purchased a farm in nearby Beechwood (notably, a town *without* a papier-mâché layout). Ostensibly because he feared the social whirl of Stanwood could threaten his marriage due to the wide chasm between his and Joan's social classes, Harry moved his wife to the Beechwood farm. And that was that.

The selection of a soap opera town sometimes confounded even the most invested participants in its outcome!

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Radio Recall
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