Toby's Corntussel News
The Schaffners Take their Show on the Radio

by Michael Kramme

"Here comes Toby, here comes Suz, with their fun to chase your blues."

This announcement alerted radio listeners that for the next 15 minutes, Neil and Caroline Schaffner would bring them the latest comical happenings from the fictional village of Bugtussel, Iowa. Thousands of midwesterners weary of the Great Depression and World War II tuned in to Toby's Corntussel News for a daily dose of humor.

The show's stars, Neil and Caroline Schaffner, were already familiar to midwestern audiences through their traveling theatrical company, which had been touring Iowa, Illinois, and Missouri since 1925. Their company was similar to hundreds of traveling entertainment enterprises in the late 19th and early 20th centuries. Typically, a company of actors and musicians arrived in a community, performed a mix of dramas, comedies, and specialty acts for several days, and then moved on to the next town. In the early years, the companies performed in opera houses, theaters, and town halls for most of the year. During summers, when buildings were too warm for the audience's comfort, the companies moved their shows into tents. As the popularity of motion pictures increased, fewer opera houses remained available to the traveling companies, and many of the companies became summer-only operations. By the early 1930s, as hard times set in, traveling companies had begun to falter. But not the Schaffners. They were willing to take their show on the radio, as well as on the road.

Adaptability, resourcefulness, and risk-taking had long been hallmarks of Neil Schaffner, who had first fallen in love with the theater as a boy in Fort Dodge, Iowa, at the turn of the century. Progressing from audience, to backstage, to on stage, Schaffner held a variety of jobs in local and traveling productions. In 1924 Schaffner was visiting his hometown of Fort Dodge, when he first saw southern-born Caroline Hannah in the chorus line of a show named "Al Russell and His Sizzling Cuties." She caught his eye, and a few months later, he hired her to join Angell's Comedians; he was the company’s manager as well as a performer. They became engaged while on tour and were married in Sac City on July 24, 1925.

Neil and Caroline soon left the Angell show and organized their own company, "The Neil E. Schaffner Players." During the Schaffner Players' first season (1925/26), they performed nine months in the opera houses and, to escape the heat, three months under canvas. Neil wrote many of their plays and played a variety of roles ranging from leading man to a comic character named "Toby." Caroline played the young, beautiful ingenue and occasionally leading lady roles.

The Schaffner Players were appearing in West Burlington in September 1935, when Johnny Palmer,
During nine months of the year, the Schaffners, like many touring performers, set up their stage and scenery, bleachers and chairs under huge canvas tents. As their radio show flourished, they capitalized on their "Toby and Susie" fame to draw even larger audiences. Here, the Schaffners set up their show in Lewiston, Missouri, in the 1940s.

During nine months of the year, the Schaffners, like many touring performers, set up their stage and scenery, bleachers and chairs under huge canvas tents. As their radio show flourished, they capitalized on their "Toby and Susie" fame to draw even larger audiences. Here, the Schaffners set up their show in Lewiston, Missouri, in the 1940s.

During nine months of the year, the Schaffners, like many touring performers, set up their stage and scenery, bleachers and chairs under huge canvas tents. As their radio show flourished, they capitalized on their "Toby and Susie" fame to draw even larger audiences. Here, the Schaffners set up their show in Lewiston, Missouri, in the 1940s.

During nine months of the year, the Schaffners, like many touring performers, set up their stage and scenery, bleachers and chairs under huge canvas tents. As their radio show flourished, they capitalized on their "Toby and Susie" fame to draw even larger audiences. Here, the Schaffners set up their show in Lewiston, Missouri, in the 1940s.

During nine months of the year, the Schaffners, like many touring performers, set up their stage and scenery, bleachers and chairs under huge canvas tents. As their radio show flourished, they capitalized on their "Toby and Susie" fame to draw even larger audiences. Here, the Schaffners set up their show in Lewiston, Missouri, in the 1940s.

During nine months of the year, the Schaffners, like many touring performers, set up their stage and scenery, bleachers and chairs under huge canvas tents. As their radio show flourished, they capitalized on their "Toby and Susie" fame to draw even larger audiences. Here, the Schaffners set up their show in Lewiston, Missouri, in the 1940s.
“Susie” for most of the plays. The traveling company was now more often known as the “Toby and Susie Show” than as the “Neil E. Schaffner Players.”

Pleased with their exposure on radio, and its effect on ticket sales, the Schaffners decided to try for work on a larger station. In Chicago, they auditioned for the Wade Advertising Agency. (At that time, many radio programs were still supplied by sponsors, who relied on advertising firms to produce the programs and used the air time to sell their products.) Walter Wade offered the Schaffners a three-minute spot on the weekly radio show *National Barn Dance*, starting in November 1936. *Barn Dance* played before live audiences on Saturday nights and was broadcast over the NBC network of 550 stations. Toby and Susie shared the microphone with headliners Joe Kelly, Lula Belle & Scotty, The Maple City Four, and other regulars. Toby was even given license to poke fun at the show’s sponsor, Alka-Seltzer. One evening, Joe Kelly and Toby added these lines to the live commercial:

KELLY: Do you take Alka-Seltzer?
TOBY: I certainly do. I follow the directions.
KELLY: What do you mean?
TOBY: I keep the bottle tightly closed.

The Schaffners were soon gaining notice in the radio world. As a reviewer for NBC News Services commented, “Uncle Ezra’s Rosedale, famous home of the mythical five-watter, Radio Station E-Z-R-A, has a rival on the Alka-Seltzer National Barn Dance broadcasts now that Tobias Tolliver and Susie Sharp are putting Bugtussel, Iowa on the map with their “Cockeyed News” now a regular feature of the Saturday night program.” The reviewer continued: “Tobias and Susie, who in private life are Mr. and Mrs. Neil Schaffner, made their rollicking comedy popular . . . last winter, during a lull in their tent show business . . . . Their radio comedy features the publisher of a small town tabloid and his gossipy minded girl-friend.”

After nine months on *National Barn Dance*, the Schaffners chose to return to the tent for the summer of 1937, eager to perform again for audiences face-to-face. But they recognized that they had also become radio personalities. To maintain their presence on the radio, they appeared on *Barn Dance* once a month through the summer or had letters from “Toby and Susie” read on the air during the program. And with an agreement from the show’s sponsor, they now

*Bill* here as “radio’s comedy sensation,” the Schaffners first broadcast on WCAZ. According to a script description, the “Toby” character was “a country boy, blustering, headstrong, lovable and a keen wit.” Susie was “a level headed small town girl [who is] very much in love with Toby for the qualities she alone knows he possesses.”
advertised themselves as “Direct from the Alka-Seltzer Barn Dance.”

The next winter season, when the Schaffners lost their Barn Dance spot to a New York comedian, they turned to other stations, first to WMT in Cedar Rapids, and then to WOW in Omaha, where they successfully auditioned in early 1938 for the Peterson Baking Company, bakers of Peter Pan Bread. Their new show’s format would be much the same as their previous 15-minute program. However, the sponsor insisted on one change. Because bakers would not want their products associated with bugs, Toby’s Bugtussel News became Toby’s Corntussel News.

The program originated live from the WMT studios from 11:30 to 11:45 a.m., Monday through Friday. The broadcast went out over a network of five stations: WOW in Omaha; in Iowa, WMT (Cedar Rapids) and KMA (Shenandoah); and in Illinois, WHBF (Rock Island) and WCAZ (Carthage). The Schaffners were again responsible for writing the 15-minute programs and performing them live, five days a week, throughout the winter season (they suspended the radio show when the summer tent season started up).

The format of Toby’s Corntussel News remained basically the same over the next few years. The first thing the listeners heard was a jingle composed and played by WMT’s Frank Voelker, billed as “radio’s blind organist”:

Here comes Toby, here comes Sus
With their fun to chase your blues.
Buy the freshest bread you can
Complete your meals with Peter Pan.

Next, announcer Bennie Alter warmed up the listening audience with: “It’s all in fun. Just to brighten
Local Auctioneer Improves

After Bein’ Hit By Truck

Singing Practice Held Last Night

(Lemmie Coldsett’s used car ad got mixed up in this way. A practice’ for Community Sing. Opera was held last night. On my used car lot by several local ladies. Sally Annie Waddles was lovely, to be sure. She got a good, good price. Verna Devore sang sensationally and, of course, she deserves her popularity. Her voice, because of one extra good note, and starting pick up. She has about a singing appearance as an old model car. But completely repaired. All the others have one thing in common: they all used to sing here in Tusc. Last year, the young lady was ‘en Yore, All Yours. (You can unscramble this for yourself?)

There Goes Tobe! There Goes Suse!

There They Go For The Corntussel News!

OBE: FAX

Toby

The best cure for seasickness is to sit under a tree for an hour. Statistic proves that over a period of many years there are the same number of women that get married the day they marry as men.

Local Congressman Promises Big Result

Caleb Flintmoss, local business man, who was recently elected to Congress, promised his first turn will be one of big results. He has promised to cut down government expenses in a big way. He says he has discovered that barnacles on the ships cost the government expenses in a big way. He says he has discovered that barnacles on the ships cost the government expenses in a big way. He says he has discovered that barnacles on the ships cost the government expenses in a big way.

MARRIAGE: that happy relationship is just like a shelf of cash. One part is given without the other. Joined together as they cannot be separated. Each part moves in opposite direction and play the sickness with any one that comes between them.

All things change—even love. In the old days a划分 would dress himself up in the Sunday-go-to-meeting full peg top and get himself dressed up in a jolly best suit and walk down to his house. He kicks in the front door and says, "Get going!" He then steals into crowded streets. They build cities in crowded districts. When it would be much better to build them in the country where there is lots of room. It is better to have loved a short man than never to have loved a tall.

FAMILIAR FACES in CORNTUSSEL

FORD

Locally the best news was showed up by Susie’s pup together with Mr. Pan’s adio breda. This is all we could get out. The ladies of the Tusc. & Stich Club met at all grocers. Lu Cash Sniggins was in charge with thin and tender crusts warping a seasoned gown with an eyeful flavor. Her hair dress was the very latest and looked like Honey Cracked Wheat. She is quite a character. Stilch Club met at all grocers. Lu Cash Sniggins was in charge with thin and tender crusts warping a seasoned gown with an eyeful flavor. Her hair dress was the very latest and looked like Honey Cracked Wheat. She is quite a character. Stilch Club met at all grocers. Lu Cash Sniggins was in charge with thin and tender crusts warping a seasoned gown with an eyeful flavor. Her hair dress was the very latest and looked like Honey Cracked Wheat. She is quite a character.
your daytime hours the foolishness of Toby and Susie sent to you with the best wishes of the Peter Pan Bakers.” In case anyone had missed an episode, Alter reviewed the story line of the last few episodes. Just before the day’s episode began, a commercial for Peter Pan Bread was broadcast live, always ending with the phrase, “Will you listen?”

The Schaffners would stretch a story line over a dozen episodes. Each plot involved some silly scheme devised by Toby. In one story line, for instance, Toby is trying to please Susie’s disapproving mother. To get in her good graces, he promises her some canaries he expects to win in a contest. But all he wins is an offer of one canary for every 24 packages of perfumed laundry bluing he sells. Quickly failing as a salesman, too, Toby instead uses the bluing to dye some sparrows, which he passes off as singing bluebirds.

Just as Toby is about to ask Susie’s parents for permission to marry their daughter, a telegram announces the arrival in Bugtussel of Professor Ebenezer Schnozzle, here to examine the unusual birds. During the examination, the professor accidentally puts on Toby’s blue sunglasses instead of his own glasses and declares the birds to be genuine and, indeed, quite rare. A victory for Toby! The wedding will go on, or so it seems. Busy with plans, Susie’s mother now decides that the bluebirds must sing at the ceremony. And if they do not, she warns Toby, the marriage will not take place.

But now a commercial interrupts the drama for the day, followed by the announcer’s teasing wrap-up: “What will Toby do now? Will Susie’s mother figure out what really happened? What will Susie think when the beautiful blonde comes into town?”

As the show concluded, listeners heard the theme song again, then the promise that “Toby and Susie will return at this same time tomorrow and it will all be in fun,” and finally the reminder that “Toby and Susie, presented by the Peter Pan Bakers, have reached you by a special midwest network.” Neil Schaffner signed off each day with: “This is Toby Tolliver saying, ‘Keep ‘em smiling.’ ”

Toby and Susie appeared in every episode. Other regulars included Susie’s parents and her Aunt Mehitable, the town constable Zeb Proudy, and the printer Shorty Snaggelby. The episodes, built on simple humor and familiar characters, used several running gags. Every time Zeb Proudy came into the office his dog fell asleep and Zeb had to awaken it as he left. Toby always answered the phone by saying “Commence,” and ended each phone call with “This end is through.” Although the Toby character would evolve over Neil’s career, essentially Toby Tolliver was a bumbling rube whose good heart and good intentions generally won out over more savvy, sophisticated characters. Susie became the foil or “straight man” for Toby. Whenever he had one of his crazy ideas, she was always the voice of reason and common sense, even though she would always go along with him.

More than 330,000 listeners tuned in daily to Toby and Susie, according to Milton Peterson, vice-president of Peter Pan Bakers. He understood the program’s appeal: “The character of the program was a simple humorous comedy of the audience sympathy type, very high in emotional appeal,” he expounded. “It combines laughter, suspense and pathos, tears or near tears, and keen sympathy for the character in their frustrated aims. They are constantly trying to do something, trying to accomplish something, frequently failing, but always bouncing back with optimism, ready to undertake it anew, making all of the mistakes and meeting all of the problems that are met by simple country folks in the smaller towns.”

Toby and Susie’s following continued to grow. In 1939, they received some 7,800 Christmas cards. Neil recounted how a shopkeeper had refused to wait on customers until the show was over. In 1941, the Schaffners persuaded the sponsor to run a promotion. They created an actual issue of the Cornhusker News, printed 10,000 copies, and offered it free to anyone who requested it. In just 15 days, more than 33,000 requests poured in, often with praise for the program and for Peter Pan Bread. Some of the letters attested to the role the show played in listeners’ daily routine:

“Your story is twice told nearly every day you’re on the air. You tell it to me and then it’s my turn when Friend Husband comes from work. Just as often as not his greeting will be, ‘What did Toby get into today?’ ”
—Mrs. Lou Loveland, Oelwein, Iowa

“We want to thank you and Peter Pan Bread for a lot of enjoyment. We always need laughable nonsensical entertainment and of course we all need it very much in times like these.”
—Louis Poorman, Shell Rock, Iowa

“Please send me your newspaper. I enjoy your program very much. I just want to see if it is as dumb as you are Toby.”
—Mrs. Elmer Kantz, Rock Island, Illinois
Thousands of fans of Cornussel News requested this “wedding photo” of Toby, Susie, and the cast.

“Please send me a free copy of the Cornussel News. I am a steady listener for I think you are very funny. I would hate to be Tobby. Sincerely, Age 13, 1941 Yours”

—Jimmie Mixer, Beverly, Illinois

“I am one of your listeners and I sure do enjoy your program. It really is worth my time to just stop my work and listen as it is just so good that I can’t miss a bit of it. It takes one’s mind off of war news and bad luck just around the corner.”

—Dorothy Brenizer, Shenandoah, Iowa

Some letters contained more personal messages:

“I know my daughter Betty 12 yr. old will be listening too at Iowa City Hospital Inf. Paralysis victim of over a year ago. She never misses your program.”

—Mrs. Mary Foley, Marion, Iowa

“Please send me the Cornussel News, and if you care to send one to the Sunny Slope Sanitarium, Ottumwa, Iowa, to Lorraine Junkman it would be something for pastime for all patients on the porch she is on.”

—Mrs. Walter Junkman, Manson, Iowa

The Schaffners eventually published three issues of the newspaper, emblazoned with the slogans “Published weakly now and then” and “If you subscribe to the News it will serve you right.” Like the radio show, the newspaper was filled with invented news stories and advertisements, its humor relying on misinformed spellings and double entendres, as in these want ads:

WANTED: To rent, room by middle-aged man with large bay window.

BON TON CAFE—Eat hear onct’ and youl never et anywhere else.

FOR SALE: Dining room table, by young lady with mahogany legs.
NOTICE: Anyone found around my chicken coop at night will be found there the next morning.

WANTED—Laundry and such. Latest methods used. We do not tear your clothes with machinery. We do it carefully by hand.

FOR SALE—Large bed by old maid that folds up and looks like a piano.

The Schaffners had found a niche among the soap operas and serialized dramas rampant on radio. As a promotional brochure described it, “these two former NBC laugh riots” were a welcome break, “coming at the time of day when the air is choked with sob-sister, three-cornered love affair programs.” Buoyed by their success, the Schaffners, with the assistance of the Peterson Baking Company, decided to sell the program to other stations. Depending on their size, stations paid them between $5 and $40 as weekly royalties. Stations from coast to coast purchased the series. An industry advertisement in 1940 listed 76 subscribers, including WOR in New York and KFY in Los Angeles. Eventually, 172 stations in 24 states carried the series, as did 25 Canadian stations. (With their sense of humor, Toby and Susie no doubt appreciated the fact that they were reaching towns with names like Moose Jaw, Saskatchewan.)

After Pearl Harbor, the various stations’ interest in the Schaffners’ show dropped away, but Peterson Baking Company continued to sponsor Toby’s Corntussel News on the regional network until 1943. Then in 1945, the Wade Advertising Agency in Chicago again approached the Schaffners with an offer: 26 weeks on WMT in Cedar Rapids, sponsored by Green Mountain Cough Syrup and G-M Liniment. The Schaffners accepted the offer, and Toby and Susie delighted their radio listeners again. After 13 weeks, the station conducted another test of the show’s popularity. This time they offered a free wedding photo of Toby and Susie. Almost overnight, the station received 10,000 requests.

In spite of the show’s success, the Wade Agency did not renew the contract but bought rights to Lum & Abner instead. Frustrated, Neil and Caroline Schaffner said goodbye to their radio careers. From then on, they focused fully on their traveling theater opera...
tions. The war had not lessened their success on the road, despite tire rationing and limited men available for male roles. Audiences still wanted diversion from daily cares and world calamities, and they still wanted something to laugh about.

Long after most traveling companies and repertoire troupes had taken down their last tents, the Schaffner Players continued to perform for midwestern audiences. They became a living tradition, attracting urban audiences curious to see what some now called “folk theater,” and maintaining their rural audiences who held them in loyal affection. For 46 years, in fact, until 1962, their traveling show entertained midwestern audiences eager to watch their antics and dramatics on stage. Besides their longevity, the Schaffners had accomplished something else—for a decade in the midst of their career on the road, Toby and Susie reached new audiences on the airwaves, during the Golden Age of Radio.

Long after Toby and Susie left the air, the Schaffner Players continued their tent shows, into the 1960s, in fact. Above, Neil and Caroline Schaffner (on porch) perform in Rebecca of Sunnybrook Farm with other actors in a production during the 1948/49 season.

NOTE ON SOURCES
All materials used for this article are in the collections of the Theatre Museum of Repertoire Americana, including The Fabulous Toby and Me, written by Neil E. Schaffner with Vance Johnson (Englewood Cliffs, NJ: Prentice-Hall, 1968); audio tapes of the broadcasts; and various publicity materials for the program. The cartoon of Toby and Susie, on page 27, is from a WTMJ advertisement, dated 1939, for their Comtusel News radio show.

The Theatre Museum of Repertoire Americana, in Mt. Pleasant, Iowa, houses a unique collection of memorabilia from early American popular entertainment. The museum displays stage scenery, costumes, props, photographs, and other items from the touring companies that played in hundreds of opera houses, town halls, and tent theaters from the 1850s through the 1950s. The collections also include items from Chautauqua, showboats, and minstrel shows. In the museum’s research library, the collections comprise more than 1,000 play manuscripts (most were written especially for the traveling companies), 5,000 photographs, 2,000 programs, 700 posters, and other advertising items. The museum sponsors an annual seminar in April, at which scholars and troupers give presentations on various aspects of popular entertainment. The museum, located on the grounds of the Midwest Old Threshers Organization in Mt. Pleasant, is open Tuesday through Friday from 1:00 to 4:00 p.m. and other times by appointment.

Michael Kramme is professor of theater and chair of the Division of Fine Arts at Culver-Stockton College in Canton, Missouri. His earlier theater-history articles for this magazine focused on Hazel Cass and Jesse Cox.

Spring 2000 35