

BEHIND THE CAMERAS: A TRIBUTE

In the early days of television, broadcasters didn't have the high-tech gadgets of today. But they did have unique personalities, like that of WCCO-TV's Toby Prin.

By John Prin

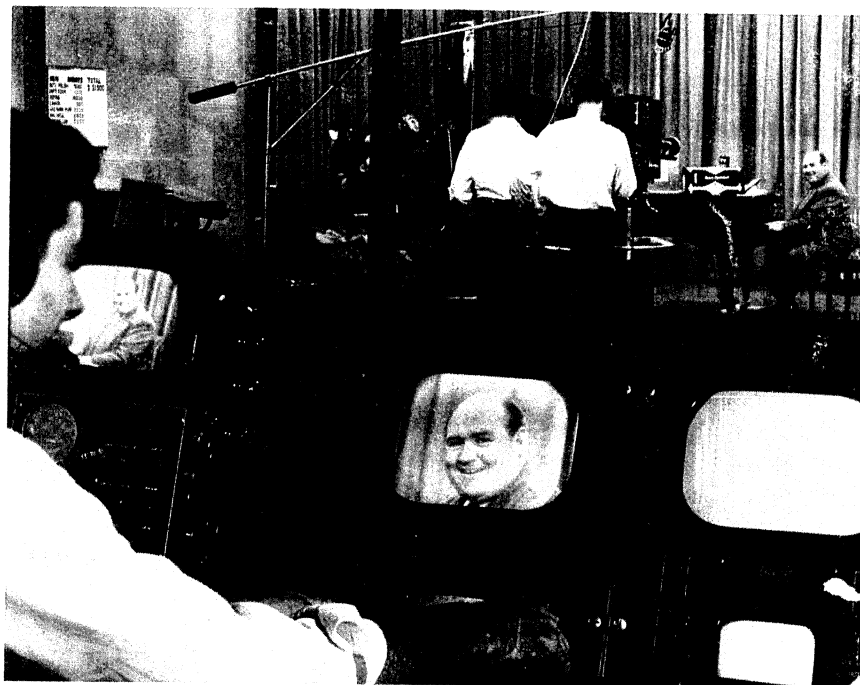
Along with thousands of other midwestern viewers, I watched his round, jolly face smiling on the 19-inch black-and-white screen. His bald head gleamed from the WCCO-TV studio's bright lights. His voice crooned the bubbly strains of "Doggie in the Window" over the speaker. As the camera tilted down to my father's stubby fingers stroking the keys of the Baldwin piano, I heard his familiar refrain—the words so many neighbors, friends and strangers across the miles of Minnesota and Wisconsin prairies and forests knew so well—"And now another *Mailbox Melodies* tune for you folks out there."

Eight hours later, at 1:30 that morning, I was awakened by our creaky garage door opening. From my bed I heard the door bang shut and my dad's non-broadcast voice in the kitchen. In his raspy, weary, cigar-chewing muttering, I detected him searching for my mom's rice pudding hidden somewhere in the refrigerator. This was his nightly ritual: Toby Prin's arrival home after another 18-hour day.

Later, as he did every so often, he came into my bedroom and whispered, "Good night, Johnny." Most times I was asleep, as were my brothers, Tommy and Dave, who were also on his appointed rounds. But sometimes I felt the touch of his pudgy hand on my cheek. I peeked from behind sleepy eyelids and saw the loving look on his face. What I didn't see were the wrinkles from heart spasms and intestinal aches that he hid so well.

The year was 1954. I was 10 years old. We lived in a tiny white colonial home in St. Louis Park.

In the mid-1950s, almost everybody who was anybody in the area had a TV set. The earliest models, 7-inch screens with flickering shadow images and scratchy-sounding speakers, were fast being replaced by fancier 17- or 19-inch models. As the new medium grew, so did Dad's public prominence.



It was broadcast news of a folksier variety in 1954 when WCCO-TV personality Toby Prin entertained young viewers with songs on the live daily program "Mailbox Melodies."

In a restaurant or a store, fans young and old would shake Toby's hand, eagerly ask for his autograph and buzz excitedly about seeing their friends on last week's talent show. It never occurred to me that I had any choice other than to share Dad with everybody.

Dad was a pioneer. He was a celebrity in a boom industry. Although at home he was plain and unassuming and never dramatic, to the world he was robust, jolly and larger than life—by appearing regularly in others' living rooms, he became public property.

But he wasn't. Few fans were aware of Dad's collection of hats, both protection for his bald head as well as expressions of his character. Nor did they know of his pipe collection—dozens of finely carved dark woods displayed in racks in our den. People often assumed he was the life of the party at home. No; he avoided playing the piano or singing for guests, shrugging like the doctor who declines to venture a prognosis on his

day off. Mostly, Toby Prin was known for his trademark, an ever-present cigar. Even when he went swimming, he'd puff away on a Dutch Master or White Owl, his face upturned comically to prevent it from going out.

In my college years, I heard about his early days as an entertainer on the Iron Range. When we'd visit our aunts and uncles, they would tell us how he'd played the parlor piano as a boy at his family home in Michigan, where he was the youngest of nine children born to an immigrant tin miner from England. Dad later moved to Minnesota and dated Mom, one of four daughters born to an immigrant laborer from Sweden. He got his start as a band leader on the Iron Range in the 1920s, when he used the stage name "Tiny Speck." It was Mom who persuaded him to seek the success he ultimately found in Twin Cities radio. His transition to television brought pride to everyone who was part of his

history and "remembered him when."

My fondest memories center on my visits to WCCO's Ninth Street studio in downtown Minneapolis. I'd ride the bus to see him in the bustling chaos at Channel 4. He, along with the other "names," would be so busy that he couldn't take more than a second away from his basement cubicle to say hello before whisking me upstairs to the Client Room, a plush cavelike chamber reserved for bigwigs. There the privileged few could sit in oversized swivel chairs and observe the studio's goings-on through immense plate-glass windows. I loved my view of the enchanted kingdom beyond: the soundproofed realm of monitors, microphones, cameras, cables, boom arms, cardboard sets—crowned, of course, by the blinking red "On-The-Air" sign.

From this vantage point I spied Cedric Adams, monarch of WCCO's monochromatic empire and erstwhile columnist for the Minneapolis *Star*; Rollie Johnson, the freckled, bespectacled spokesman for sports; Bud Kraehling, the court jester of fair weather; John Gallos, the town crier; and Arlie Haberle, the first lady of fashion and society. I remember the day when a new face, a young announcer named Dave Moore, distinguished himself as a budding prince of broadcast news and commentary.

On the monitor screens flanking the technical director's domain, there also appeared competitors KSTP-TV and WTCN-TV, with their celebrities in clear view: Randy Merriman, champion of charm and game-show smiles; Mel Jass, all fast-moving hands and fast-talking sales pitches; and Casey Jones (Roger Awsumb), the kids'-show host in his too-clean overalls and cap.

All these celebrities and charmers graced the black-and-white world of live ballyhoo and bloopers where my father, the chubby minstrel of Channel 4, also made his living.

The good times didn't last long. Late in 1956, I sat stunned, along with Mom, Tommy and David in the Physicians and Surgeons Building across from the WCCO-TV studio. We tried to absorb the news that Dad was diabetic and had a serious heart ailment. At 51, his overweight and overwork were doing more than making him drowsy, cranky and forgetful—they were taxing his health to the danger point.

Our family had just finished the 18-month process of building a huge house in faraway Edina, then an untamed suburb of expansive lots with expensive country-style elegance.

From the day we moved in, Dad spent more and more time in doctors' offices, and the expenses of both new home and hospital visits became as burdensome as

his efforts to fight fatigue, blackouts, high blood pressure, nerve blocks and, eventually, the amputation of his right leg.

Dad's working days at WCCO dwindled into unemployment. His best-known show, *Stillicious Talent Hunt*, which he hosted as Uncle Toby for mobs of kids on Saturday mornings, went off the air because of his absences. When four months at the Mayo Clinic brought only a backlog of bills, my brothers and I secured jobs at local stores and restaurants. Mom, who had worked at Dayton's for three years, was promoted to full-time interior decorator at the Southdale store.

In 1960 we had to sell our Edina home and move to a smaller place like our earlier home. We all hoped Dad would get better, but the decline in his strength and weight and spirit were inexorable. The Dad we saw daily had the same smile and soft glow in his eyes, but his rosy cheeks were sagging and the torment in his soul had dimmed any sparkle in his temperament.

During my daily visits to Methodist Hospital (room 318), I gazed at his wasted-away torso (he was now 90 pounds, down from 355 pounds eight years before). I grimaced at the irony of his having become a real "Tiny Speck."

The whole family knew he would never leave that room again. I longed for the same loving, caring look in his eyes as when I was younger. But, on a dismal November day in 1965, at age 59, he died.

My main impression was of Dad working all day downtown at the station and his seldom being home, of his playing the piano or organ at nightclubs and bars from eight in the evening until one in the morning, and his entertaining at private parties or special affairs on his night off. The regret of our "missed" times together depressed me. He'd so seldom "been there," and he was from the generation of fathers, like his father before him, who just never told his kids that he loved them.

Yet one final memory surfaced. His faithful record of attendance at my high-school hockey games was remarkable because I was the second-string varsity goalie for perennial power Edina. This meant I suited up for every game but sat on the sidelines. As the season reached an end, my chance finally came. Nervously, but competently, I stopped a flurry of enemy shots. The crowd jumped to its feet. The cheerleaders holed my name. And Dad, standing on his artificial leg, whooped and hollered along with the rest of them. For that moment he had "been there," and the love in his eyes shined. □