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## Red Skelton and Clem Kadiddlehopper

Wes D. Gehring\*

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“Things have sunk lower than a snake’s belly” [a popular comment by Red Skelton’s Clem Kadiddlehopper].

Newspaper journalist John Crosby in 1952: “How [comically] stupid can you get?”

Skelton: “I don’t know. I’m still pretty young.”<sup>1</sup>

From the books of George Ade, Kin Hubbard, and Will Cuppy to the television work of Herb Shriner and David Letterman, Indiana’s humor has long entertained the nation. But Red Skelton’s more-than-fifty-year reign as a Hoosier comedy artist of national significance and his ongoing ties to the state—particularly as his character Clem Kadiddlehopper—place him in a peerless position among Indiana comedians. Since the 1930s Red, fittingly, has achieved success in every medium that he has attempted, including vaudeville, radio, television, and motion pictures. The cornerstone of the comedian’s career is the unprecedented twenty-year television run (1951–1971) of his variety show.

All artists’ backgrounds provide special insights into their work, but there seems to be a unique fascination with the biographies of humorists. Clowns comically comfort audiences with their physical and spiritual resilience. In addition, society seems especially spellbound with the clown chronicle that reveals tragic roots—the ability to provoke laughter despite personal sadness. Once again Skelton is in a unique category among Indiana humorists, for he survived the harshest of childhoods. His circus clown father died an alcohol-related death before Red was born, and as a youth he endured tattered clothing, taunts about his

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<sup>1</sup> John Crosby, “Radio and Television,” column, New York *Herald Tribune*, January 6, 1952, Red Skelton, 1950s, file, Billy Rose Theatre Collection (New York Public Library at Lincoln Center, New York).

extreme poverty, an attic bed that often had snow on it in the winter when he awoke.<sup>2</sup>

The carrot-topped future comedian arrived July 18, 1913, in Vincennes, Indiana, his mother, Ida Mae, christening him Richard Bernard, though his friends would soon rename him Red. There were also three older Skelton brothers, so Ida put in long hours as a cleaning lady at the local vaudeville house. In 1941 Red observed, "My earliest memories are of my mother fighting desperately to keep her family together with a roof overhead and something to eat on the table."<sup>3</sup> One of Red's boyhood friends described the Skelton family as being "so poor they didn't have a pot to pee in or a window to throw it out of."<sup>4</sup> Another childhood acquaintance remembers her sister's having to stop a teenage romance with the impoverished Red because he allegedly had no future.<sup>5</sup> In 1947 the comedian recalled doing odd jobs at an early age because "the family was hungry."<sup>6</sup> He did everything from selling newspapers to racking balls at the local poolroom. Yet young Red had time to horse around with friends and to try all those early rite-of-passage things small-town boys once did, such as stealing watermelons and getting sick from smoking green tobacco.

Skelton's youth represented a time when American humor was undergoing a transition from emphasis on the rural, capable, crackerbarrel figure to the urban, comic antihero. For example, one might contrast the down-home wisdom of a Will Rogers with the comic vulnerability of Robert Benchley's overwhelmed little man. In the nineteenth century the crackerbarrel character—traditionally focused on political involvement, rural residency, the fatherly image, employment, and success—dominated American humor. If and when an antihero appeared, his comic frustration usually resulted from a failure to follow the commonsense model of his crackerbarrel counterpart. By early in the twentieth century, however, American comedy tastes began to find an increased affinity with the urban antihero—nonpolitical, childlike, leisure-oriented, and frustrated. The difficulties of modern urban life began to be reflected throughout comedic popular culture, from the cartoon strips of George Herriman ("Krazy Kat") to vaudeville comedy as performed by Ed Wynn in his fool persona.<sup>7</sup>

<sup>2</sup> Brenda Grant, daughter of Carl Hopper, interview with author, Indianapolis, February 6, 1994.

<sup>3</sup> Red Skelton, "Skelton Writes Life Story Under Title 'I'll Tell All,'" *Milwaukee Journal*, December 8, 1941, Green Sheet Section, p. 1.

<sup>4</sup> Interview with Grant, February 6, 1994.

<sup>5</sup> Janice Thompson Dudley, Evansville, Indiana, letter to author, July 10, 1991.

<sup>6</sup> *Current Biography*, 1947, see under "Red Skelton."

<sup>7</sup> For a brief discussion of the transition in American humor from the crackerbarrel figure to urban antihero, see Wes D. Gehring, "Kin Hubbard's Abe Martin: A Figure of Transition in American Humor," *Indiana Magazine of History*, LXXVIII (March, 1982), 26-37.

Two Hoosier humorists, George Ade (1866–1944) and Frank McKinney “Kin” Hubbard (1868–1930), were instrumental in the evolution of this transition on a national level. Ade is best remembered for his *Fables in Slang*, which, like their often flippant morals, might better be described as sketches in colloquial language. These short pieces were comic close-ups of the quaint and unusual aspects of what others would merely see as the drab and/or trivial everyday world. Like James Thurber’s later fables, Ade’s antiheroic comedy toyed with a world view of rather frightening randomness. Hubbard’s career is best known for the crackerbarrel figure Abe Martin, who reached great national popularity after receiving Ade’s strong support. While Ade’s fables closed with a comic moral, Hubbard’s Martin material began and ended with a brief humorous axiom that ranged from comic insight to absurdity. Martin was more wise crackerbarrel figure than fool, but he became progressively more antiheroic from the 1910s on.<sup>8</sup>

Coincidental with the appearance of the urban antihero in American humor there developed a literary movement often defined as “the revolt from the village.” Beginning with the publication of Edgar Lee Master’s *Spoon River Anthology* (1915) and Sherwood Anderson’s *Winesburg, Ohio* (1919), the movement actively attacked small-town life and received its greatest boost from the 1920s satirical fiction of Sinclair Lewis, starting with his novel *Main Street*. This revolt against village and farm life was best portrayed in period films by W. C. Fields’s small-town, henpecked antiheroes. Skelton’s early years, then, paralleled the comic and literary decline of the wise rustic, who was replaced more and more with the urban antihero or the often befuddled rural/small-town character.

Be this as it may, the young Red would do anything for a laugh,<sup>9</sup> and, like most comedians, he became a student of the people around him.<sup>10</sup> In fact, the most fascinating aspect of Skelton’s gift of humor, besides the sheer joy of laughter that it provides, is the diversity of his comedy types. His characters represent a cross section of American humor, from the mime of Freddie the Freeloader, his Chaplinesque tramp, to his bombastic con-man politician, San Fernando Red. Skelton’s one-man band of comedy also includes the Mean Widdle Kid (whose “I Dood It” crack became a national catchphrase in the early 1940s); punch-drunk boxer Cauliflower McPugg; and

<sup>8</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>9</sup> A childhood chum recollected one of the comedian’s favorite early gags, which involved Skelton’s very tiny dog. “He would put it between two slices of bread and tell everyone he had a hot dog.” Brenda Grant, Indianapolis, letter to author, September 7, 1993.

<sup>10</sup> Red Skelton, conversation with author, Muncie, Indiana, September 18, 1986. This conversation occurred after Ball State University had conferred an honorary Doctorate of Humanities upon the comedian.

Sheriff Deadeye, who was anything but a deadeye. The Skelton figure seemingly closest to Red's Indiana background, however, is Clem Kadiddlehopper, an archetype of the country bumpkin, a character more crackers than cracker barrel, but still an affectionate parody of the rural rustic.

In terms of Skelton's entertainment work, his first radio success was directly tied to his ability to play a comic country bumpkin such as Clem. His debut was in January of 1938 on the *Red Foley Show*, which was broadcast locally over station WLW in Cincinnati, Ohio.<sup>11</sup> Foley's show was a weekly half-hour country-western program with Skelton providing the rustic comedy relief. Red was so popular that within a few months he had his own radio program out of NBC in Chicago. It was not yet a national hook-up, but the comedian was clearly on his way.

While Skelton soon developed a repertoire of characters, by the late 1940s the figure that was invariably first associated with his work was Clem. For instance, before Ozzie and Harriet Nelson had a popular 1940s radio program that successfully moved to 1950s television, they doubled as both the musical support and straight "men" on Skelton's first nationwide radio program, *Red Skelton's Scrapbook of Satire* (1942). When Harriet was later interviewed about these years, the first of only two of Skelton's characters that she discussed was Kadiddlehopper (the other being Junior—the Mean Widdle Kid).<sup>12</sup> Harriet played Clem's girlfriend, Daisy June.

When one examines Skelton's move to television in 1951, the significance of Clem (among all his characters) is further underlined. The extensive Skelton files in the Billy Rose Special Collection in the New York Public Library at Lincoln Center fully document Kadiddlehopper's importance in the comedian's repertoire.<sup>13</sup> In an article in the New York *Morning Telegraph* on Red's concern about his September 30, 1951, television debut, Skelton observed, "I'll still be the same kind of clown." He then proceeded to lead off his discussion of comedy characters with Kadiddlehopper; and when the show business bible, *Variety*, later reviewed the program, special attention was given to "Clem, the squirt from the milk barn." The following season, after Skelton had won 1951 Emmy awards for both "Best Comedy Show" and "Best Comedian," radio and television critic John Crosby suggested that the comedian's characters were "all pretty much alike," with the basic model being the "imbecilic Clem Kadiddlehopper." Still later, astute entertainer/ author Steve Allen included a chapter on Skelton in his acclaimed critical study *The Funny Men* (1956). Clem was again the

<sup>11</sup> Arthur Marx, *Red Skelton* (New York, 1979), 63.

<sup>12</sup> *Ibid.*, 93.

<sup>13</sup> The Billy Rose Collection is the premier resource for anyone doing research in the field of entertainment.

first of only two of Red's characters to be discussed (the other was Cauliflower McPugg). When Skelton did a television special from Miami Beach's famous Fountainbleau Hotel in the 1950s, he opened the show with Clem, who drove "his ancient car up the circular driveway to the hotel's overwhelming entrance, and made his awe-struck way across the lobby." A review of the special pointed out Clem's everyman nature with its undercrust of pathos, "the sad-funny plight of the man who is out of his element, and only half suspects it. It is the characteristic Skelton humor, the universal appeal of a universal comedian."<sup>14</sup>

Unlike most television comedians in the 1950s, Skelton, through his star character, Clem, dealt in humor that had its roots in rural/small-town America. This focus was decidedly not true of such contemporaries as Milton Berle, Bob Hope, Sid Caesar, Ernie Kovacs, Jackie Gleason, Henny Youngman, or Jack Carter. Even those with a comedy arsenal of characters (such as Caesar, Kovacs, and Gleason) had nothing quite like Clem. Kovacs's figures tended to be intellectually surreal, such as his gay poet Percy Dovetonsils, while Gleason was at his best as Brooklyn blue-collar loudmouth Ralph Kramden. Even Gleason's silent antiheroic character, the Poor Soul, was an urban misfit. And Caesar, though a gifted mime, excelled at phonetic comedy; thus, his greatest figures had foreign roots, such as his fraudulent know-it-all professor with the German accent.

Those period stand-up comics who had a bucolic slant, such as Cliff Arquette with Charlie Weaver, George Gobel and his small-town, self-described "brown-shoe type," or even Indiana's Herb Shriner did not have the uniqueness of Red's Clem. Moreover, unlike Skelton, they did not have a cast of other characters with whom to avoid overexposure. Indeed, even when Skelton's variety show was later canceled, his ratings were high. He was a victim of demographics: his many viewers tended to be older people from small-town/rural markets when it became network strategy to court the buying power of the urban young adult.

Possibly the ultimate tribute to the uniqueness of Skelton's popular and pivotal Clem is that other performers seemed unable or unwilling to create similar characters of their own even though other successful yet lesser Skelton characters were "borrowed." San Fernando Red was an obvious model for Johnny Carson's later huckster TV matinee host, Art Fern; and Red Buttons's television variety show in the 1950s featured a punch-drunk boxer, Rocky Buttons, who was more than a little like Skelton's Cauliflower McPugg.

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<sup>14</sup> Virginia MacPherson, "TV Debut Has Him Jittery," *New York Morning Telegraph*, September 30, 1951; "Red Skelton Show," *Variety*, September 24, 1952; John Crosby, "Radio and Television," column, *New York Herald Tribune*, October 8, 1952; Fountainbleau review, undated, all in Red Skelton, 1950s, file; Steve Allen, *The Funny Men* (New York, 1956), 268.

The significance of Clem has continued through the years. Red's busy concert schedule (as late as 1991 he was doing seventy-five shows a year) still finds Kadiddlehopper as the character who logs the most stage time. In his later years the multitalented Skelton also composed "the Kadiddlehopper March" for concert bands. The song was published by the Sam Fox company, copyright owners of several John Philip Sousa marches.

Equally as significant as Clem's unique status in Skelton's career are the character's special Indiana ties. At a Ball State University Homecoming program in October, 1991, Skelton called Kadiddlehopper a citizen of his Vincennes birthplace,<sup>15</sup> a comment that took a fascinating twist two years later when writer Brenda Grant, the daughter of Carl Hopper, a boyhood friend of the comedian, privately suggested that her father might have been a model, or at least a starting point, for Red's Clem.<sup>16</sup>

The Hoppers were Vincennes neighbors of the Skeltons. Both families were poor and comprised of male children. Carl, two years younger than Red, suffered from a severe hearing loss, which caused many to consider him not quite "all there." This misconception resulted in cruel putdowns when Carl misunderstood what people said and replied with under-his-breath asides and a patented "Huh?" Even Carl's parents felt that there was no need for him to receive an education; consequently, Hopper acquired a lifetime habit of butchering the English language. His high-pitched voice was also a result of his hearing loss. Despite these problems Carl remained a remarkably upbeat farm boy who was especially taken with wearing hats and laughing at his own jokes.<sup>17</sup>

Red was a rare friend among those often mean faces, probably as a result of both his lifelong everyman nature and the fact that as the youngest of Ida Mae's boys he had often been picked on by his older brothers. Regardless, the future comedian made it a point to include Carl in group activities. Red also nicknamed him "Kadiddle," possibly playing upon the slang definition of "diddle," which meant idling away one's time. Perhaps to make Carl's inclusion palatable to the other boys, Skelton periodically did an affectionately comic imitation of his friend; but that was just Red, someone who was forever "on," even as a child. Carl never found this offensive. Indeed, he was proud to generate this extra attention from his advocate.<sup>18</sup>

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<sup>15</sup> Wes D. Gehring journal, October 5, 1991, vol. I, p. 50.

<sup>16</sup> See notes 2 and 9; see also Brenda Grant, Indianapolis, letter to author, January 2, 1994; Grant, telephone interview with author, August 21, 1994.

<sup>17</sup> See note 16.

<sup>18</sup> A comment by critic Leo Roster in the early 1950s nicely suggests how the young Red could inoffensively have done such an imitation: "He has insight and compassion and a kindly respect for those who are not quite 'all there' [be it naïve or slow-witted]. To imitate . . . [them] without malice or derision is quite a feat—and Skelton brings it off every time." Quoted in Marx, *Red Skelton*, 170.



CARL HOPPER AT AGE TEN  
1925

Courtesy Brenda Hopper Grant.

These facts do not prove—or even suggest—that Skelton took his Clem character full-blown from a childhood friend, who later through ear surgery and a hearing aid achieved a successful adult career; but no artist, however talented, operates in a vacuum. Thus, the Carl “Kadiddle” Hopper–Clem Kadiddlehopper parallel merits further attention. Both figures appear to be inordinately happy, illiterate rural rubes, forever fracturing the language and mumbling things under their breath. Their voice patterns are funny in part because they are pitched higher than the norm. They laugh at their own jokes and are associated with hats (two things that apply to most Skelton characters). Though it has not been recorded that

deafness caused Carl to cup a hand around his ear, Clem sometimes did so.

Since Skelton's Clem would occasionally say or do something surprisingly correct, the devil's advocate might claim that the comedian's character was merely drawn from the oldest and most universal comedy type, the wise fool. This character is synonymous with the court jester of the Middle Ages who would deliver unpopular truths behind a mask of incompetency, that of the fool. What makes Clem's character unique to Indiana is that any variation of the wise fool uses his immediate surroundings as a stage for the comedy. The archetype jester performed for a royal court, and his colorful costume, like his allegedly foolish pronouncements, were a send-up of the elaborate rituals practiced by the aristocracy, be they in wardrobe or war. Although, in contrast, Clem's Hoosier is closer to being a common man—some might say very common—he is a modestly dressed, often vulnerable, rural/small-town figure whose audiences were frequently from the same background. The jester's elaborately veiled comments were meant to safeguard him in the always treacherous royal court; Red shielded Clem's occasional insight in the common sense prized by his listeners. Given the close proximity of Clem's Vincennes to Brown County, the home of Kin Hubbard's fictional Abe Martin, one could indeed spin an Indiana wise fool hypothesis.

Martin, as has been indicated, was more wise crackerbarrel figure than fool, but the characters with whom Hubbard populated his Brown County had more than a little in common with a rube like Clem. And occasionally Hubbard gifted them with insight, just as his Martin became progressively more antiheroic through the years.<sup>19</sup> In fact, New York *Herald Tribune* critic John Crosby placed Skelton's character in a time frame that paralleled Hubbard's formative years: "Clem Kadiddlehopper is a rustic of rococo design not seen in these parts since the 1880's."<sup>20</sup>

Not all Indiana humorists are linked to some old-fashioned down-home tradition, of course, and there are famous Hoosier entertainers whose work and wit are anything but rustic. In the field of music, in particular, the sophisticated compositions of Cole Porter and the jazz patter of bandleader/actor Phil Harris are cases in point. Even in this area, however, the state's celebrated composer/actor Hoagy Carmichael projected a decidedly old-fashioned, nonrushed wisdom in his character actor asides.

Perhaps no one will ever know just how much Skelton's boyhood friend influenced the later Clem Kadiddlehopper, especially since the comedian (as is true of many gifted artists) is reluctant to

<sup>19</sup> Gehring, "Kin Hubbard's Abe Martin," 26-37.

<sup>20</sup> John Crosby, "Radio and Television," column, New York *Herald Tribune*, January 6, 1952.



divulge sources that contributed to his success.<sup>21</sup> Whatever the Hopper factor, which would seem considerable given Skelton's 1991 affirmation of the Vincennes tie and Grant's recollections about her father, there are other probable influences on the creation of Clem. Most obvious would be Red's boyhood encounter with the vaudeville performer Ed Wynn. This pivotal pioneer in the new antiheroic humor played Vincennes's Pantheon Theater in the early 1920s. Wynn befriended the young, raggedly clothed, street-corner newspaper hawker and gave him a ticket to the evening show. Initially Skelton did not know the identity of the stranger, but he was soon impressed both by who his benefactor was and what a wonderful occupation he had. At this time Wynn was best known for his "Perfect Fool" act, which had him fumbling over his language and his comic props. The humor came from the character's alleged over eagerness to perform successfully a given physical trick. His ongoing failures were both funny and endearing, traits that also describe the later Clem, including the propensity for pathos. Moreover, Wynn's fool enjoyed bringing his character off the stage, from wishing departing audience members good-night to just being amusingly ineffective in whatever the situation. Skelton frequently employs the same tactics in his stage act. For instance, before his show starts, he enjoys announcing nonsense neighborhood traffic reports over the public address system.

If Wynn contributed to the entertainingly foolish actions of Skelton's Clem, Hubbard's Abe Martin possibly helped define the look of Red's special character. Young Skelton sold papers at a time when Abe's comic axioms were syndicated both throughout Indiana and the United States in general. More importantly, however, each Abe moral included a Hubbard drawing of farmer Martin in clownish clothing. Such garb symbolized the growing antiheroic tendencies of Martin's crackerbarrel figure. Teenage rube performer Skelton, as a prototype Clem, would wear a similar costume in his early stage work. Like Martin's, Red's outfit consisted of a misshapen hat, oversized coat, mismatched tight pants, and extra large shoes.

However one defines Clem's roots, the character is uniquely different from Skelton's other creations. Clem came first and is most obviously tied to an Indiana background. He is also the only player

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<sup>21</sup> At a Ball State University press conference in September, 1986, for example, Skelton denied having been influenced by Chaplin, someone he had readily credited in the past and who obviously inspired Freddie the Freeloader. The most celebrated Freddie routine is borrowed directly from Chaplin's *Modern Times*. The sketch finds a hungry tramp anxious for the security and comfort to be found in a short jail term. The inspired ticket to incarceration is ordering and eating in an expensive restaurant without any money. Perhaps, however, Red's denial was one more, though indirect, Chaplin influence. Early in his career Chaplin credited French film comedy pioneer Max Linder with having stimulated his own clown artistry, a statement he denied in later years.

from a rural/small-town background, if one discounts the rather superficially drawn Sheriff Deadeye—the cowboy coward. Clem's rustic slant, despite his buffoonery, connects him with a rural American tradition upon which the country was founded. Jeffersonian democracy celebrated the independent farmer over the compromised urbanite. To know nature was to know God. And even rural naïveté was once heralded as representing an idealism that had no thought of deceit. It was fitting, then, that an early archetype of Clem led to Red's first success on radio and that the figure was pivotal to his transition into TV.

Red's artistry, like that of many other clowns, is in adding an affectionate comic distortion to real people and/or things that most individuals pass by. This special entertainment vision also reminds audiences how much art can cost and persuades them that it is worth the price. The popularity of Red's Clem, the wise fool, also gifts Carl (a lifelong Skelton fan) and other viewers with a minor victory over life's day-to-day frustrations, a victory possibly not otherwise achieved.