

Red Skelton

By Doug Wissing

When I was a kid in Vincennes, it was a big deal when Red Skelton came to visit my grandfather, Clarence Stout. There wasn't much going on down there in the mid- 1950s, and Red was definitely the town celebrity. He would show up in a vast car and disappear behind the pocket doors of my grandfather's wainscoted office, which was hung with hundreds of autographed publicity photos of show business greats, and not-so-greats, from the 1920s to the 1940s.

Besides being a composer and impresario, my grandfather managed the old Vincennes vaudeville theater, the Pantheon, when Red was a penniless rubber-faced kid with a penchant for falling off stages. After watching the fatherless boy crack up audience after audience, my grandfather told him, "Get out of town, Red, there's nothing here for you. You've got too much talent."

Skelton took my grandfather's advice, and when he died on 17 September 1997 at eighty-four years old, America and Indiana lost a clown, and a link to our development as a people. Skelton's career spanned a broad swath of the history of the entertainment industry, from medicine shows to coast-to-coast broadcasts; his audience ranged from a traditional rural society to a fast-paced urban one. It is a long way from the physical clowning of a medicine show to the arid cynicism of a Dennis Miller monologue. Yet in his career, Red Skelton saw it all, moving from medicine shows to tent shows to showboats to circuses to burlesque halls to dance marathons to vaudeville stages to nightclubs to radio, movies, and, ultimately, twenty years of prime-time television.

He was born in Vincennes on 18 July 1913, hitting his cue for the first time by arriving "before his brothers got home from school," as his mother had hoped. He grew up in a poverty that marked him for life, his family "so poor they didn't have a pot to pee in or a window to throw it out of," as a childhood friend expressed it. Red already had run away from home once by the time my grandfather counseled it. He left town in 1925 with Doc Lewis's Patent Medicine Show when he was just twelve, peddling patent medicine in Indiana, Arkansas, Illinois, and Missouri for the summer, before returning for another round of ill-fated schooling.

After a stint of Vincennes street-corner entertaining and helping out at the Pantheon, he linked up with the John Lawrence Stock Company, a touring theater group playing "serious drama" under a tent in the hinterlands, and he was off at fourteen into the world of entertainment. "Mom used to say I didn't run away from home," Skelton recalled. "My destiny just caught up with me at an early age." A week later, he and the touring group discovered his talent for comedy, and his lack of talent for drama, and he found himself abandoned on the banks of the Missouri River in a fleabag hotel. As he pondered his fate, a stern-wheel showboat, The Cotton Blossom, churned around the bend, and quickly Skelton found himself afloat as an all-around entertainer. He traveled the

Mississippi and Ohio Rivers for several seasons, taking pratfalls, performing in blackface in minstrel shows, and telling monologues and jokes.

Skelton's father had worked as a clown for the Indiana-based Hagenbeck and Wallace circus. Years later, Skelton encountered the circus putting up the big top in a river town, and he left the riverboat touring company to join Hagenbeck and Wallace as a walk-around clown, mastering the physical comedy that became his stock-in-trade.

Red never really severed his Indiana connections. The circus brought him back through the state. He worked for a season with my grandfather's minstrel revue, playing a blackface mammy. Stock companies, carnivals, and the burlesque circuit also brought him through Indiana.

As he honed his skills, he entertained the crowds at the depression-era dance marathons, where couples staggered around an arena till all but one dropped. Later, he became a major star of radio, television, and movies, but he never forgot his origins, returning time and again to refresh his roots, check out his birthplace, accept his awards, establish a children's relief foundation, which still operates.

He was a complex man, paying the emotional price for his art. High-strung, suspicious to the point of paranoia, subject to career-threatening bouts with the bottle, Skelton could be his own worst enemy. In many ways he was a mirror of Indiana: toting a vengeful pride born of insecurity; loyal and sentimental to a degree found saccharine in the more sophisticated sections of the country; publicly clean in his humor, privately scandalous; alternately stingy and generous to a fault; corny as only a son of the Corn Belt can be.

At his core, he was a small-town early-twentieth-century Indiana boy. Comedian Steve Allen saw "something about Red that was partly a little boy." Skelton's "Mean Widdle Kid" acted out the willful churlishness in all of us. "I dood it," became a national phrase in the 1940s as his radio show took off. "I not pullin' de kitty's tail," he insisted as the pantomime cat clawed for escape, "I just holdin' on. He pullin'."

His egalitarianism revealed itself in his art. Characters like Clem Kadiddlehopper and Freddy the Freeloader are goofy, down-on-their-luck guys, but they comport themselves with the natural nobility of a democratic citizen. Like Charlie Chaplin's little tramp, Skelton's characters show us ourselves with a humor born of pathos. "To imitate a lunkhead without malice or derision is quite a feat—and Skelton brings it off everytime," Leo Rosten wrote.

Performing was his "plasma," one biographer wrote. Skelton himself said, "People talk about stage fright, but what scares me is not so much the going on as the coming off. I only come to life when people are watching." Though enormously wealthy after fifty years of headlining, twenty years of prime-time television, canny investments, and even a burgeoning career as a painter, Skelton couldn't stop performing.

I met him in 1983, when he donated a rare book to Indiana University's Lilly Library while in Bloomington to give a performance at the auditorium. He was a kindly senior citizen at the Lilly reception, gracious in his memories of my grandfather, "Oh, he was so important to me as a young man," he said. That night on the stage, though nearly seventy, he put down his cane and took off his knee braces to pratfall and act silly with his beloved characters till he had the audience of grandparents and college students howling in their seats. "The last vaudevillian," I thought, "He just can't help himself."

As always, Red Skelton said it best, "I love people. That's why I clown. It's simply that I love to make people laugh."

Doug Wissing is a writer and art resource consultant in Bloomington.