

THE GREAT GILDERSLEEVE Baby

Program Guide by Ivan G. Shreve, Jr.

“What a character!”

It was just another ordinary summer day in August of 1941 when businessman Throckmorton P. Gildersleeve boarded a train from his home base in Wistful Vista and rode the rails to the town of Summerfield. “Gildy,” as his friends often called him, was traveling to the neighboring burg to handle the estate of his recently departed younger sister and her husband. As executor, he had been handed the responsibility of looking after their two children, Marjorie and Leroy Forrester. Gildersleeve, who owned a company in Wistful Vista that specialized in making girdles, figured to wrap things up in a week or two and bring his niece and nephew back home to stay.



Harold Peary

But, as we're all well aware, the best laid plans...well, you can finish the rest. During his journey by train, Throckmorton had a run-in with a cantankerous magistrate named Horace Hooker. As luck would have it, it was this *same* Horace Hooker who had been assigned to oversee the Forrester estate. Although he claimed to be acting in the best interests of the children, Judge Hooker seemed to take secret delight in ordering Gildy to post a bond that would not only soak up all of his ready cash, but would require him to sell his precious



Peary at the piano.

girdle corporation. For better or worse, Gildersleeve resigned himself to the fact that he was now the newest resident of Summerfield...and his years in Wistful Vista would soon be just a mist in the memory.

August 31, 1941 marked the debut of radio's first successful spin-off, *The Great Gildersleeve*. As portrayed by actor-singer Harold Peary,

Throckmorton P. Gildersleeve would go on to become one of radio's most memorable "characters"—and the show has since become beloved, admired and respected by classic radio fans as one of the primary blueprints of character-based situation comedy. Radio historian Elizabeth McLeod once described the series as "the *One Man's Family* of situation comedy," in that it transcended the earlier vaudeville-based verbal slapstick of *Fibber McGee & Molly*—the series on which the Gildersleeve character first appeared—and became a program that emphasized a gentler humor concentrating on realistic (if slightly exaggerated) characters and circumstances.

Peary had been a mainstay of *Fibber McGee & Molly* since 1937, playing a variety of one-shot novelty characters like a Chinese laundryman named Gooley Fooey and "Perry, the Portuguese Piccolo Player." The actor managed to sell series creator Don Quinn on the idea of giving him a much meatier part—a regular who would serve as next-door neighbor to radio's most notorious prevaricator, Fibber McGee. Quinn, who had experimented with various characters with the surname of "Gildersleeve," liked the idea of a man pompous and windy enough to match McGee's bluster...and lo and behold, on October 17, 1939, Throckmorton P. Gildersleeve was born.

Peary clearly relished playing a larger part on *Fibber McGee & Molly*, and his Gildersleeve character soon become one of the most popular elements on the program. But after a couple of years, the actor began to despair that the role was starting to typecast him; he often had difficulty getting other radio jobs because he was so well identified with the character. Peary also lamented the fact that his musical talents were sidelined because of the Gildersleeve role, and by 1941 he was seriously considering abandoning the show.

Fibber McGee & Molly's sponsor, Johnson's Wax, and the National Broadcasting Company were anxious to retain Hal's services. A proposal to "spin-off" the Gildersleeve character into his own series was presented to Peary, who became intrigued by the prospect—particularly since he stood a better chance of being able to resurrect his singing prowess on a show on which *he* was

the star. An audition (the term used in radio for “pilot”) was recorded on May 14, 1941, with a storyline very similar to that described in this booklet’s first two paragraphs. The only major difference between the audition and the premiere episode was that the name of Gildersleeve’s niece was changed from “Evelyn” to “Marjorie.”

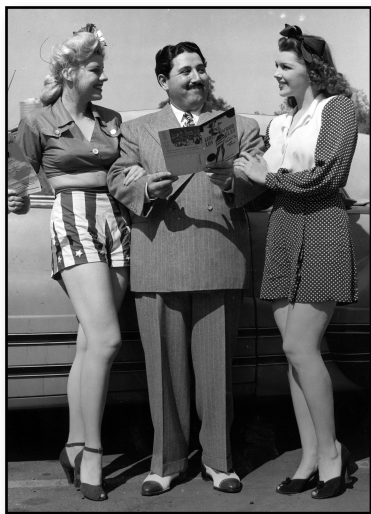
Well, there was one other thing. The *Gildersleeve* audition was presented to the Johnson’s Wax people with the intention of having them sponsor the show as *Fibber McGee’s* summer replacement. The Boys from Racine, Wisconsin, however, decided to pass and go with another program instead. However, the record attracted the attention of the Kraft Foods Company, who agreed to sponsor the show - and continued to sponsor it for much of its sixteen-year run on NBC.

Listening to the Gildersleeve character on an early *Fibber McGee & Molly* episode and then following it with an installment of *The Great Gildersleeve*—well, the difference is almost night and day. On *Fibber*, Gildersleeve existed mainly to quarrel with his “little chum,” and they often engaged in some first-rate verbal brannigans...even going so far as to fight with water hoses on one broadcast. On his own show, though, Gildy had mellowed out considerably. He didn’t lack for a sparring partner, but Judge Hooker (despite his orneriness) came around and became one of Gildy’s best friends. With the new responsibility of looking after Marjorie and Leroy, he became much more mature and undeniably likeable. He even metamorphosed into becoming one of Summerfield’s leading citizens, with his job as the town’s water commissioner (a position he acquired in the show’s second season) helping out enormously in that respect.

Gildy also became one of radio’s most notorious “bachelors on the prowl.” On *Fibber*, Gildersleeve was married and even had a mother-in-law, but by the time he pulled into Summerfield that chapter of his life sort of dissipated - much to the amusement of radio buffs, who have often speculated that The Great Man might have done away with Mrs. Gildy and buried her underneath the floorboards of his old residence. The new Gildy had an admirably active libido, and seemed to be catnip to all of the women in Summerfield. He had a long string of girlfriends, including school principal Eve Goodwin, dance instructor Dolores del Ray, piano teacher Joanne Piper, nurse Kathryn Milford, and neighbors Ann Tuttle, Ellen Knickerbocker and Paula Winthrop.



Peary puffs up in one of the four *Great Gildersleeve* movies released between 1942 – 1944.



Peary "on the prowl."

Gildersleeve's most enduring romance, however, was with Southern belle Leila Ransom—a Savannah, Georgia native who would often add three or four syllables to the ones already in his first name ("Thrawk-maaahhhtin ...") and whose on-again, off-again engagement with our hero often fueled many of the series' stories. Gildy and Leila began their long-running courtship in *Gildersleeve's* second season, and she even managed to get him to the front of the altar in the last show that season (broadcast June 27, 1943)...but a last-minute plot twist restored Gildy's bachelorhood-in-good-standing. Leila would make periodic returns to *Gildersleeve* and, in fact, is present in a few broadcasts in this collection—her cousin, Adeline Fairchild, was dating the water commissioner at that time.

Gildy's romances demonstrate the major strength of *The Great Gildersleeve*—the program would often highlight what are now known today as "story arcs." Some plots on the show would last for several episodes at a time; Gildy and Leila's first engagement and almost-marriage, in fact, was the highlight of the 1942-43 season. In the early part of 1944, Gildersleeve began an ill-fated mayoral campaign in Summerfield that coincided with his engagement to Eve Goodwin. Not *every* broadcast concentrated on these plotlines, but the arcs would sort of hover around in the background, waiting to be called on when needed. For modern audiences, this has proved most beneficial. Due to the ravages of time and neglect, there are a great many episodes from *The Great Gildersleeve* that no longer exist (particularly those from the war years, when transcriptions were issued on glass discs and were easily broken), but the way the show was written, the storyline could easily be picked up again even if one misses an episode or two.

At the beginning of the 1948-49 season, Gildersleeve was on a shopping excursion with Marjorie and Leroy when, in returning to his car to drop off some packages, he found an abandoned infant girl in the backseat of his automobile. Attempts to locate the parents of the child proved futile, and so for most of the season Gildy and his family found themselves catering to one more member of the "clan." This addition would impact Gildersleeve in many ways—informed that the child would be taken away from him because of his bachelor status,

Gildy proposed to Adeline in order to keep the baby. Complications soon ensued when The Great Man managed to get himself engaged to both Adeline and her cousin, Gildy's old flame Leila. The ticklish situation eventually worked itself out, with Gildersleeve the beneficiary of good luck when the father of the infant surfaced on a memorable Christmas-themed broadcast.

The "abandoned baby" storyline not only hooked listeners to tune in every week, but also allowed the show's sponsor, Kraft Foods, to capitalize on the arc by sponsoring a "Name *The Great Gildersleeve* Mystery Baby" contest. Beginning September 29th, Kraft gave away a grand total of 721 prizes over a period of five weeks—including brand new 1949 Ford automobiles (four per week, for a total of twenty), Cory coffeemakers, Toastmaster toasters, General Electric table radios, and other awards. The Grand Prize winner—the one whose name was picked as the winner on December 5th—would also be awarded a prize of one-thousand dollars. (The winning entry, by the way, was "Romary"—a name that you don't find too many parents adopting for their progeny nowadays.)

As *The Great Gildersleeve* continued through the years, there would be additional story arcs—the following season (1949-50), Gildy's niece Marjorie got engaged and became Mrs. Bronco Thompson on May 10, 1950, an occasion that prompted a five-page spread in the May 23rd issue of *Look* magazine. The following season, Marjorie gave birth to twins, which allowed Kraft the sponsor to once again give away goodwill merchandise with a "Name the Twins" contest. By that time, however, the star of *Gildersleeve*—Harold Peary—had moved on to newer pastures. Sound-a-like actor Willard Waterman replaced him (and in listening to the Waterman broadcasts, it's almost impossible to tell the difference), continuing to play Summerfield's famous bachelor on the show until it finally came to an end on March 16, 1957.

All shows feature Harold Peary as Throckmorton P. Gildersleeve, with Walter Tetley, Marylee Robb, Lillian Randolph, Richard LeGrand, Earle Ross, Arthur Q. Bryan, Una Merkel, Ken Christy, Gloria Holiday, Shirley Mitchell, Bea Benaderet, Ben Alexander, Gale Gordon and Gil Stratton, Jr. as frequent supporting players. The announcer is John Wald, the music



The cast of *The Great Gildersleeve*.



Lillian Randolph (Birdie) with her real-life daughter, Barbara Sanders.

is by Jack Meakin and his Orchestra, and the episodes were broadcast on NBC and sponsored by Kraft Foods.

CD 1

A: “Baby Girl Left in Gildy’s Car” – 09/08/48

While carrying some department store packages out to his automobile, Gildy is surprised to discover an abandoned baby inside! His attempts to leave the child with the proper authorities are continually stymied, however, and he’s forced to take the infant into his care until its mother can be located.

B: “Taking Care of Baby” – 09/15/48

Since Birdie and Marjorie are going out for the evening, it looks as if Gildy’s been appointed sitter for the baby. The Great Man expends a good deal of energy looking for a “co-sitter.” Harold Peary sings “Go to Sleep My Little Buckaroo.”

CD 2

A: “Taking Pictures of Baby Upsets Leroy” – 09/22/48

Leroy gets upset when Gildersleeve moves him out of his room in order to accommodate the baby. So, Gildy’s nephew relocates to his “clubhouse” in the backyard...a packing crate! Gildy’s old flame Eve Goodwin stops by to set him straight about Leroy’s jealousy.

B: “Name the Baby Contest” – 09/29/48

The Jolly Boys have arranged for an insurance policy that will help Gildy’s baby when college time rolls around. But in filling out the policy form, the Great Man realizes that the youngster doesn’t yet have a name! Gildy and the Jolly Boys sing “Mighty Like a Rose.” The contest to name the child begins on this broadcast.

CD 3

A: “Gildy Tries to Reform for Welfare Investigation” – 10/06/48

Gildy gets a notice from the county welfare department alerting him to the fact that an investigator, Mrs. Phoebe Crabtree, will be paying him a visit to check on the status of the baby. He’s afraid that if she’s dissatisfied she’ll take the child away, so he agrees to give up some of his “vices” in order to get a glowing character reference from a snooty society woman.

B: “Visit by Aunt Hattie” - 10/13/48

A telegram arrives at the Gildersleeve household...with the bad news that the formidable Aunt Hattie is coming for a visit! As is her wont, she insists on taking complete control of the household, particularly the new addition to the family.

CD 4

A: “Marjorie Ready to Marry to Keep Baby” - 10/20/48

Judge Hooker informs Gildy that it’s possible the authorities will remove the baby from his household and that adoption is the best way to keep it. But, a prospective parent has to be married to adopt a child. Since he’s reluctant to march down the aisle, Marjorie decides that she’ll take the initiative and tie the knot with her boyfriend Ben.

B: “Gildy Proposes to Adeline” – 10/27/48

The pressure is still on Gildy to adopt the baby—particularly from his hated neighbor and rival Rumson Bullard, who’s expressed a desire to add the infant to his own family. Will Gildy take the plunge and propose to his steady girl friend, Adeline Fairchild?

CD 5

A: “Engagement” – 11/03/48

Adeline accepts Gildy’s marriage proposal, but Gildy isn’t so certain that he wants everyone to know about their engagement. The two of them agree to keep it secret...but it doesn’t stay confidential for very long. At the engagement party, the Jolly Boys sing “That Old Gang of Mine,” and Gildersleeve encounters a surprise visitor from his past!

B: “Leila Ransom Back in Town” – 11/10/48

After his former fiancée Leila Ransom makes a surprise appearance at his engagement party, Gildy must figure out a way to explain the news about his proposal to Adeline. Should anyone be surprised that The Great Man ends up engaged to Leila, too? Gildy serenades Leila with “Speak to Me of Love.”

CD 6

A: “Engaged to Leila and Adeline” – 11/17/48

Gildersleeve’s predicament of being engaged to two women becomes a lighter burden when he has a vision of what life will be like in thirty years married to Adeline...and then Leila. He decides that he wants to marry Adeline...but his plans to find a beau that will take Leila off his hands backfires!

B: “Water Commissioner’s Helicopter Flight” – 11/24/48

Complaints about the low water pressure around town prompt Mayor Terwilliger to order Gildy to head up to the reservoir and release more water. But to insure positive press and big headlines in the newspaper, our hero plans to fly over the reservoir...in a helicopter!



Peary at the microphone.

CD 7

A: “Leroy’s Holiday Job” – 12/01/48

Leroy needs \$12.75 for Christmas gifts...but when he asks Gildersleeve for the money, his uncle suggests that he exercise a little independence and get a part-time job. Leroy finally lands a position selling newspapers, but Birdie and Marjorie pack Gildy’s bags for a guilt trip when they learn Leroy will have to hawk the papers in cold weather.

B: “Disappearing Christmas Presents” – 12/08/48

Gildersleeve has his hands full trying to hide Christmas presents in the house so that Marjorie and Leroy don’t find them. When Gildy gets together with Adeline to wrap the gifts, he discovers there’s a sneak thief in the house! The winner in the program’s “Name the Baby” is announced on this broadcast.



Walter Tetley (Leroy Forrester)

CD 8

A: “Christmas Shopping” – 12/15/48

With expenses regarding the baby and his upcoming marriage to Adeline looming on the horizon, Gildersleeve vows to economize on Christmas gifts this season. His suggestions to family and friends about saving on presents end up earning him unwanted hostility.

B: “Christmas Eve at Gildersleeve’s” – 12/22/48

Gildersleeve’s plans to have just an intimate Christmas celebration with the family, instead of his traditional open house, go awry when he ends up having to invite Adeline and the Jolly Boys. Gildy and the family finally learn who the father of the baby is in this special holiday-themed episode.



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