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Articles & Stories

Our Guy Woody
Radio Man of Echo Valley Farm
by Neil Gould

Cue Announcer: Next— *Our Gal Sunday*

Cue Music: Red River Valley
(Guitar solo with baritone humming melody)

Cue Announcer: (Voiceover) Yes. *Our Gal Sunday*. The story of a girl from the little mining town of Silver Creek, Colorado who grew up to marry Lord Henry Brinthrope of Black Swan Hall. The story that asks the question, "Can a girl from a little mining town in the West find happiness as the wife of a wealthy and titled Englishman?"



Our Gal Sunday is brought to you by the makers of Anacin: A-N-A-C-I-N. Anacin, you see, is like a doctor's prescription. That is, it is made up of not just one, but a combination of medically proven active ingredients in easy-to-take tablet form.... So the next time you suffer from the pain of headache, neuritis or neuralgia—try Anacin.

And now: *Our Gal Sunday*, written for radio by Woody Klose.

For several years *Our Gal Sunday*, one of the most popular soaps of radio's golden age, was the brainchild of Woody Klose of Red Hook, a pioneer in many senses of that word. Not the Woody you may remember, the man who was active in Dutchess County civil affairs for many years. That was one of his four sons. But it's Woody the father whose story's hidden away in that program lead for *Our Gal Sunday*: the Woody who, in the depths of the Depression, went prospecting for gold in New Mexico. He never found any, but had fun panning in Silver Creek. And the Anacin commercial even has a Woody connection, since Woody the father often remarked that if he had had the right encouragement as a boy he would have become a doctor.

Willard Klose was born in Minneapolis to an immigrant Prussian family. When his mother passed away, the young boy and his brother were sent off to military school in traditional Junker fashion, since his father wasn't interested in raising two teenaged boys by himself. Then it was off to Washington University in St. Louis where, after his freshman year, Woody found himself at the beginning of an important career in the fledgling field of radio broadcasting.

In 1929 St. Louis's KMOX, one of radio's first stations, was looking for an announcer, and Woody got the job. His smooth and sweetly flowing bass-baritone made him a natural. In the early days of broadcasting crooners were stars and Woody originally saw himself as a musical matinee idol of the air. But it soon became evident that Woody's great voice was for speaking only. Now, a man like Woody would never be content reading someone else's words. At KMOX, he moved up to program director. But the Golden West was calling... After his foray into the gold fields he returned penniless to Missouri and to broadcasting.

In the early days of radio the wars for advertising revenue rivaled the Pulitzer-Hearst newsprint battles from the turn of the 20th century. The local Pulitzer paper and its station, KSD, and Woody's new home, WTMV, went at it hot and heavy. Pulitzer's paper tried, but failed to defeat the competition; it even refused to publish the WTMV schedule. Woody remembered how, when he began work at WTMV, he

had started his career as an inexperienced walk-in. So as program director Woody announced open auditions for new, untried talent. Over 100 applicants showed up on day one. He kept auditions going for a week. Hillbilly singers, dialect comedians, contraltos and reporters of local milk and grain prices all crowded through the door. More nighttime auditions were scheduled. As a result 75 musical artists were programmed for five minute spots. Then Woody began to invent new formats, like short headline reports "every hour on the hour." St. Louis Cardinals and Browns' scores were constantly updated to the background clicking of a glass-covered news ticker, and soon there was play-by-play coverage of the games. That took up afternoon programming (there were no night games in those days). So at night "for your listening and dancing pleasure," there were remote pickups from St. Louis's storied Club Paradise.

But even all this wasn't enough. Why should Woody, with his creative spirit, keep working for somebody else? So he and a partner purchased station WTMV, a 250-watt operation broadcasting out of a local hotel. Woody was finally working for himself. It didn't last long. One day in 1936 Virginia Taylor, daughter of the managing editor of a local paper, came looking for a job. Woody asked her if she could write. She said she could. He gave her a tryout: a fashion article. Virginia remembered that Woody wasn't very nice about the assignment and Woody agreed. "I was very surly in those days, especially to attractive women. I intended to be a bachelor." But the fashion article proved to be too good and Virginia was hired for an interview show, *A Woman Views the News*. It took Woody three weeks to ask Virginia for a date. Six weeks later they were engaged. Then, because Woody felt the man should be the family provider, he fired her. They were married in 1936.

Thus began one of the most fertile partnerships in the history of broadcasting. Fertility is the operative word, since Woody and Virginia, as they were busy creating a series of broadcast formats, also produced a family of four boys and two girls. That family became the touchstone for their best-remembered radio series, *Red Hook 31*. (And one of their boys, Kevin, would go on to his own stellar career in radio.)

But before *Red Hook 31* came other family-oriented shows. As "package producers"





Woody and Virginia would develop the concept, write the script, sell it to an advertising agency for sponsorship, hire the actors, and direct the program. The first of these was *The Family Man*, which started out in St. Louis as a monologue show written and performed by Woody. It proved so successful, especially with women listeners (there was an outpouring of correspondence between Woody and his fans), that in 1938 NBC called him to New York's WEAJ (the network's flagship channel, later rechristened WNBC). Two years later the show was expanded to a half hour weekly drama. The subject of this show was the adventures of a physician with three motherless children. In a sense it was Woody's own story—his loss of his mother in his early years and his longing to become a doctor. The script was laced with songs and poetry, such as "How do I love thee—Let me count the ways." "Pretty gooey" was Woody's appraisal—but it put good bread on the table. The Canadian Broadcasting Company picked it up for national distribution and the Kloses moved to Toronto to expand their activities by adding a new serial about a female physician, *Dr. Susan*.

In 1942 the family returned to New York when Woody was offered the job of head of daytime radio for the Young and Rubicam ad agency. After a brief residency in Westchester, which didn't fit the Kloses ("too snooty"), Woody and Virginia found the 100-plus-acre homestead in Red Hook, which she named Echo Valley Farm. It was the capstone of their personal and professional lives.

Once again seeking inspiration from his life, Woody took stock of his surroundings. The farm was a dream. An 18th-century house with a white picket fence, red barn, acres of pasture land and woodlots, cows, sheep, pigs, a turkey run, an apple orchard, a stream and swimming hole. From these elements Woody and Virginia crafted *Red Hook 31*: a husband and wife talk show that took the last part of its title from the old telephone number of the Klose farm, three short rings and one long.

Broadcasting five afternoons each week from the simple breakfast room of the farmhouse, Woody and Virginia would discuss the experiences of a city couple transplanted to the

country and the adjustments that move required. They talked about the kids, crops, barn maintenance; they interviewed everyone from the last of the Pony Express riders to Eleanor Roosevelt. Virginia's natural "gift of gab" drove the improvised show. There were other reasons why it worked. Listening to those beautiful mellow voices, you felt you were listening in to a talk among friends. The lost art of conversation was alive and well at *Red Hook 31*. The mutual caring and respect for one another and their family came through. There are sentimental moments, such as a broadcast based on their son Nicky's (the second Woody's) wish for world peace; but the mood is always upbeat. And always there is the consummate professionalism of the principals. A listener feels instinctively that his time will not be wasted; that he is in good hands, the hands of good and caring friends.

Today, inevitably, some things have changed at Echo Valley Farm. But there are some things that have not changed, things that must have appealed to a radio man. It's not the look of the place; it's the sound of the place. In the afternoon when a gentle rain falls on the fields and the wind rises and catches in the locusts, there is a sweep of sound and memory that the passage of time cannot erase. The sound is the same as it must have been before there was a farm, before the quiet was broken by the shouts of growing children or the soft voices of Woody and Virginia. Today Woody and Virginia rest under the apple trees by the stream, but the harmony of two people at one with nature and with each other is still broadcast there. It is a song still heard.