

TOMMY DIX
A Short Biography
by: Ken Robichaux

INTRODUCTION

In the mid-1930s, 12-year-old Tommy Dix began singing on a weekly religious radio show at WHN in New York City. Going under the name of Bobby Brittain, his appearances would prove to be the beginning of a 15-year career in Show Business and, though he didn't realize it at the time, many of the people and institutions associated with that radio station would eventually have a profound impact on his career.

The Loew's Theatre Organization owned WHN, and the radio station broadcast from the Loew's State Theatre in the heart of New York City. Loew's also controlled Hollywood's most important studio, Metro-Goldwyn-Mayer, and the radio station's call letters would eventually be changed to WMGM. In the mid-1930s the station was managed by Edward "Major" Bowes who debuted "The Original Amateur Hour" in April, 1934, and Ed Sullivan had a weekly Broadway gossip show on the station providing the first radio exposure to many future stars. These people and organizations would eventually play a vital role in the young Bobby Brittain's professional career.

So when Bobby's mother brought him to audition for Dr. Charles St. John, who ran a mission in the Bowery and hosted a radio show every Sunday, she couldn't have known what an important step this would be for her son whose powerful baritone singing voice had matured prematurely. For a while Bobby would be a regular on Dr. St. John's show, *The Bowery Mission Service*, and during this period he would become known to its radio audience as "Bobby Brittain, the Boy Baritone of the Bowery."

CHILDHOOD

Macte Virtute, sic itur ad Astra
(Those who excel, thus reach the stars)
– Motto of the Manhattan School of Music

Birth:

On December 6, 1923, Thomas Paine Brittain Navard (aka: Bobby Brittain; aka: Tommy Dix) was born to Anna Navard and Henry Leon Brittain in New York City. Anna (age 35) and Henry (age 50) were very much in love, but due to circumstances beyond their control they were not able to marry.

Although Henry visited his son often he was not a daily presence, and the child was raised by his single mother in a poor area of New York City near Harlem. She supported her son by running a thrift store out of the front of their basement apartment.

Anna was a great admirer of both Thomas Paine, one of America's Founding Fathers, and of the 19th century orator and advocate of free thought, humanism, and agnosticism, Robert G. Ingersoll. Because of her admiration of Ingersoll she called her son "Bob" or "Bobby", and it was by the name Bob Navard that the future Tommy Dix would be known during much of his childhood.

Trivia:

- Tommy's maternal grandfather was a Polish cantor.
- Tommy's paternal grandfather was a Methodist Minister in Birmingham, Alabama.
- Tommy was related to Chief Justice John Marshall, the longest serving Supreme Court Chief Justice in U.S. history.
- While running a concession stand at the 1898 World's Fair in St. Louis, Tommy's father invented the ice cream cone.

Celiac Disease:

Beginning around the age of three, little Bobby began having a number of medical problems and exhibiting many of the symptoms of starvation – swelling of the abdomen, stunted growth, fatigue, diarrhea, cramps, and anemia. It would not be until Bobby was seven that he was correctly diagnosed as having Celiac disease, an autoimmune digestive disease that interferes with the absorption of nutrients from food. People who suffer from Celiac disease are unable to properly digest fats and wheat protein (gluten), and they have to adhere to a very strict diet.

Once his medical problem was properly diagnosed and treated Bobby began to grow normally, but time had been lost and he would grow no taller than 5 feet 4 inches. It is possible that the Celiac disease may have allowed his diaphragm to enlarge which, in turn, allowed him to develop an unusually powerful singing voice. True or not, singing would quickly become an important part of Bobby's life. When his voice dropped from an alto to a baritone while singing in the Trinity Church choir, Bobby began to amaze people with the unexpected maturity of his singing voice.

Trivia:

- According to the University of Chicago's Celiac Disease Center, Celiac disease affects 1% of healthy, average Americans. But 97% of them are undiagnosed.

Epiphany:

Bobby's epiphany may have come when his mother brought him to see Nelson Eddy and Jeanette MacDonald in the 1935 movie "Naughty Marietta". When Bobby heard them sing *Ah, Sweet Mystery of Life*, tears began rolling down his cheek and he knew that he wanted to sing like that for the rest of his life. His mother, however, didn't support his decision until one day when Bobby asked to participate in a local Thanksgiving tradition where children raised money by performing on the sidewalks in their neighborhood.

Bobby's idea was to sing for the patrons in a nearby saloon. Reluctant at first, Bobby's mother eventually gave in and, while she waited outside, little Bobby went in and sang a popular Fred Astaire number, *Cheek to Cheek*. He was an immediate hit with the patrons, and he followed-up by singing a number of requests beginning with *When Irish Eyes Are Smiling*. When he finished he walked out and handed his mother almost \$5, close to a week's income. Bobby's mother couldn't believe her eyes and she suggested that he try singing in another saloon.

It was now apparent to Bobby's mother that he was going to sing whenever and wherever he could. She decided he needed a "professional" name and, using the first name by which he was known and his father's last name, she gave him the name Bobby Brittain. Now, whenever Bobby sang for people he was no longer Bobby Navard, he was Bobby Brittain.

The High School of Music and Art:

The mayor of New York, Fiorello H. LaGuardia, had recently authorized the establishment of a high school designed to provide training in the performing arts for promising students. New students were chosen through auditions, and Bobby received a four-year scholarship to the school. In addition to taking the standard classes in history, science, literature, etc., he majored in "Voice Culture" taking additional classes in theory, harmony, and chorus. He became president of his class and president of the Science Club. Although Bobby would eventually drop out of this high school to pursue his singing career, the study of science and philosophy would continue to captivate Bobby for the rest of his life.

Trivia:

- After winning a drawing at his high school Tommy got to visit Princeton University's Institute for Advanced Studies for a day. During this visit he heard Albert Einstein give a speech.
- Because of his interest in physics, Tommy was made an honorary member of the American Institute of Science while he was still a teenager.

Major Bowes' Amateur Hour (1936):

The former manager of the radio station that hosted *The Bowery Mission Service* was Edward "Major" Bowes. In 1934 Major Bowes had created a show called "The Amateur Hour" that gave a prize to the best amateur performer each week. *Major Bowes' Amateur Hour* quickly became a national sensation receiving over 10,000 applications a week and becoming the most popular show on radio. Of the thousands of applications, only 20 performers or acts were chosen for each show.

Bobby Brittain wrote a letter to Major Bowes applying for the show and comparing himself to a cross between Nelson Eddy and Lawrence Tibbett. After an audition and an interview he was chosen to be on the show, and when his voice boomed out over the airways the studio's switchboard lit up with calls for more. The show's producer quickly came over to Bobby and told him they were cancelling the final act so he could sing an encore. So it was that this 13-year-old boy with the amazing voice sang an encore for a national audience and returned the following week to sing again.

"The Bowery Mission Service" Radio Show:

Changing from skeptic to promoter, Bobby's mother heard that the leader of a nearby Harlem mission, Dr. Charles St. John, had a weekly religious radio show that featured singers and musicians. Although the performers were not paid, *The Bowery Mission Service* Sunday radio show provided valuable local exposure, and Bobby was not only accepted for the show, he became a regular who was sometimes referred to (perhaps jokingly) by the euphonious appellation "Bobby Brittain, the Boy Baritone of the Bowery."

The William Morris Agency and the Creation of "Tommy Dix":

In the mid-1930s the William Morris Talent Agency developed a program that attempted to discover the "Stars of Tomorrow". Young Bobby Brittain was one of their discoveries and they gave him a great deal of valuable advice, including the suggestion that he change his professional name from Bobby Brittain. At that time there was a popular boy soprano named Bobby Breen, and the Morris Agency felt that the public might confuse the names of the two young singers. The Morris Agency gave Bobby and his mother a few suggestions for the new name, and his mother chose the name Tommy Dix. From that day onward Bobby Navard (aka: Bobby Brittain) would be known in Show Business as Tommy Dix.

Entering Show Business (1938):

Sometime during the summer of 1938 Tommy's mother fell ill. With her unable to support them as she had done in the past, Tommy decided to quit school and "commercialize on whatever talent I had." He began by playing young people on radio shows like *The Aldrich Family*, *Superman*, and *Renfrew of the Mounted*.

The “March of Dimes”:

Tommy and his mother were great admirers of the President of the United States, Franklin Delano Roosevelt. Each January 30th, on the President’s birthday, Birthday Balls would be held across the country to raise money for the fight against Infantile Paralysis. In 1938 The National Foundation for Infantile Paralysis was officially incorporated, and the radio appeal that occurred during the week preceding the Birthday Ball events was named “The March of Dimes”.

Sometime during 1938 Tommy told his mother that he wanted to do something special for FDR and the newly named “March of Dimes” campaign, and his mother suggested that he write a song. Having never written a song before Tommy began to compose the words (he had already written a number of poems) and eventually plucked out a tune on a piano. The following year, with song in hand, Tommy went to the Brill Building in the heart of Tin Pan Alley and, with the guilelessness of youth, found a music publisher who said he would publish the song if Tommy could get invited to sing it during the next President’s Ball at the Waldorf–Astoria Hotel.

Wasting no time, Tommy immediately went to the headquarters of George V. Riley, the chairman of the Greater New York Committee in charge of organizing the 1940 President’s Ball. Without an appointment Tommy went up to the receptionist, burst into song, and caught the attention of everyone in the suite of offices including Mr. Riley. Mr. Riley immediately recognized the potential of this diminutive young boy with the amazing voice, and he invited Tommy to perform his song at the next President’s Ball.

On January 30, 1940, 16–year–old Tommy Dix attended the President’s Ball at the Waldorf–Astoria dressed in his Boy Scout uniform. The President’s mother, Sara Roosevelt, and thousands of guests watched as a legion of Boy Scouts and Girl Scouts marched into the room lead by a drum and bugle corps. Then, according to *The New York Times*, “*The climax was effectively reached when Tommy Dix, 14–year–old [sic] Boy Scout baritone, sang his own composition, ‘The March of Dimes’, a copy of which he presented to the President’s mother.*”

Tommy then lead the entire audience in a rendition of “Happy Birthday” while the birthday cake was being cut. After the show Sara Roosevelt came backstage and spoke with Tommy for a few minutes and indicated he would be invited to the White House the following year to sing his song. For a number of reasons his appearance at the White House never took place, but Tommy would sing his song again at the 1942 New York President’s Birthday Ball where the newly published sheet music for his song was sold to raise money for the campaign.

Milton Cross:

The week following Tommy's triumphant appearance at the Waldorf-Astoria's Birthday Ball, he was invited to be on the popular radio show *Coast-to-Coast on a Bus*. Its host, Milton Cross, was also the announcer for the Metropolitan Opera radio broadcasts every Saturday, and he used his *Coast-to-Coast* show to introduce many promising young singers and radio actors to a national audience. Tommy sang *I Got Plenty O' Nuttin'* from *Porgy & Bess*.

The Metropolitan Opera Auditions of the Air (November 1940)

Shortly before Tommy opened in his first Broadway play he was walking through the NBC studio in Manhattan when he heard a group of baritones warming up to audition for *The Metropolitan Opera Auditions of the Air*. Each week aspiring operatic performers would be chosen to sing on the show and earn audience support. At the end of each year two of the singers would be given small parts in one of the Met's operas. Tommy asked if he could "horn in" on the auditions, and when he sang *Old Man River* for Conductor Wilfred Pelletier and the other judges he was immediately chosen for the show. But because he was too young to compete, he was chosen to be a guest rather than a contestant. The Met's manager Edward Johnson introduced Tommy to the radio audience as "a promising young baritone", and Tommy sang *Song of the Open Road* by Albert Hay Malotte.

BROADWAY

The Corn Is Green (1940):

In the fall of 1940 Tommy was chosen to sing in the chorus of a new Broadway show *The Corn is Green*. Starring Ethel Barrymore, the play is the semi-autobiographical story of a strong-willed English schoolteacher working in a poverty-stricken Welsh coal mining town. The play opened at the National Theatre on November 26, 1940, with Tommy singing Welsh songs and playing one of the school children. He also understudied one of the larger parts.

Trivia:

- When Tommy left the show his part was eventually filled by the young actor, Tony Randall.
- In 1945 this story was made into a film starring Bette Davis.
- In 1979 a made-for-television movie of this story starring Katharine Hepburn was filmed on location in Wales.

Best Foot Forward (1941):

Late in the summer of 1941, while *The Corn Is Green* was still playing on Broadway, Tommy tried out for a new musical comedy called *Best Foot Forward*. Produced by George Abbott, who had just produced the successful musical *Pal Joey*, and co-produced by Richard Rodgers, the play was set in a Pennsylvania boy's prep school and would feature a cast of young unknown performers. Tommy auditioned and received the standard request to leave his phone number so they could call him if he was needed. Tommy was unaware that his powerful voice had caught the attention of Abbott and the two 27-year-old composers who had written the score for the show, Hugh Martin and Ralph Blane. Along with thirteen other songs, Martin and Blane had written a school fight song that they felt would be perfect for Tommy.

According to the book *Beautiful Mornin'* by Ethan Mordden:

Historian Stanley Green informs us that it was Rodgers who gave *Best Foot Forward's* prep school its famous name, for the show had gone into rehearsal without anyone's being able to come up with a suitable sound for this place of youth in merry riot. The school's fight song had been written around a "working title," Wisconsin. This became "Tioga," but that felt like . . . well, the musical comedy version of a prep school. "What we need," said Abbott, "is a name that has something to do with winning with a lot of sock in it." "That's it!" said Rodgers, " 'Winsocki.' "

So the fight song that had been tentatively titled *Buckle Down, Wisconsin* now became *Buckle Down, Winsocki*. Tommy was called back and told he would be cast as Chuck Green, a small part but one that would feature him singing the school's fight song at the opening of the second act.

Many years later Tommy learned that on opening night, after the first act was over, George Abbott felt the show was a flop. The audience response had been lackluster, and the show didn't seem to have any punch. Then the curtain rose for the second act, and Tommy's powerful baritone voice rang out with the rousing fight song *Buckle Down, Winsocki*. When he came to the end of the song and began to walk off stage the audience rose to its feet with a thunderous standing ovation, and the stage manager turned to Tommy and said, "Go out and take a bow, son, you're a star now." Soon after the play opened a reviewer for the *New Yorker* magazine wrote, "If '*Buckle Down, Winsocki*' isn't the best school song in America, I wish you'd name one."

Tommy's rendition of that song proved to be the spark that ignited the play, a point that was emphasized by Hugh Martin in a letter to Tommy dated October 4, 2001, which reads in part:

George Abbott has told me several times that the show might have failed if it hadn't been for you. He said that until you stepped forward to sing "Winsoki" he was not at all sure which way the wind was going to blow. After you stopped the show for us, he told me he knew we were going to be a smash!

Within days Abbott arranged to have Tommy record *Buckle Down, Winsoki* with Benny Goodman and His Orchestra. On the flip side of the record Peggy Lee sang another song from the musical, *Shady Lady Bird* (a song that was not used in the movie). The 78rpm record was an immediate hit around the country, and *Buckle Down, Winsoki* became one of the most popular songs of the early 1940s.

Toward the end of *Best Foot Forward's* run, Arthur Freed came to New York City and attended a matinee performance of the show. Arthur Freed was the head of the Metro-Goldwyn-Mayer unit in charge of producing the movie studio's musicals, and he liked *Best Foot Forward*. Although Harry Cohn, the head of Columbia Pictures, had initially offered to purchase the play's movie rights, Arthur Freed out-bid him and M-G-M bought the rights to the musical for \$150,000. In addition to the young composers Hugh Martin and Ralph Blane, Arthur Freed decided to bring some of the young Broadway cast to Hollywood to do the movie version. Included in that group were Gil Stratton (who had played the male lead), June Allyson, Nancy Walker, Kenny Bowers, and Tommy Dix.

Trivia:

- *Best Foot Forward* ran on Broadway for 326 performances.
- The top ticket price for *Best Foot Forward* was \$6.60.
- Tommy was paid \$75 per week to be in *Best Foot Forward*.
- The tune from the song *Buckle Down, Winsoki* was used for the 1970's *Buckle Up For Safety* public service announcements.
- Gene Kelly did the choreography for the show.
- Hugh Martin and Ralph Blane each earned between \$400 and \$500 per week while *Best Foot Forward* was on Broadway.
- Ralph Blane's real last name was Hunsecker.
- Hugh Martin graduated from the Birmingham Conservatory of Music in Birmingham, Alabama.
- Harry Cohn had wanted to buy the movie rights to *Best Foot Forward* for Rita Hayworth and Shirley Temple.
- Two months after *Best Foot Forward* opened on Broadway the Japanese attacked Pearl Harbor and the U.S. entered World War II.

Once *Best Foot Forward* had settled into its Broadway run, Tommy's bestselling record and show-stopping performance began bringing

numerous inquiries and offers to appear and sing. One of the offers he accepted was a booking at the Copacabana nightclub, just down the street from the Ethel Barrymore Theatre where *Best Foot Forward* was playing. Each night after his Broadway show was over, Tommy would walk over to the Copacabana and sing in their late show. He was such a hit that when *Best Foot Forward* closed in July 1942, Tommy was hired to sing at the Ritz Carlton in Boston for six weeks.

Trivia:

– Up until the 1960s, Boston’s Ritz–Carlton Hotel was regarded as a private club for the very wealthy. Guests were regularly checked to see if they were in the Social Register or Who’s Who, and the hotel sometimes went so far as to examine the quality of writing paper on which the guests wrote to the hotel requesting reservations (if it wasn’t of high enough quality, they were refused).

Tommy also used his sudden celebrity status to help schools and organizations raise money for various charities. Performing at Mrs. John Jacob Astor’s dinner dance for the women’s council of the Navy League in May 1944, and at the Hunter College Elementary School’s “Victory Rally” to help raise money for the Red Cross, were two such occasions.

HOLLYWOOD

Tommy is Given the Lead Role:

As soon as M–G–M obtained the movie rights to the Broadway musical *Best Foot Forward*, the studio’s writers started working on the screenplay. Some of the play’s songs were dropped while Hugh Martin and Ralph Blane wrote new ones. The location of the story was changed from a civilian prep school to a military academy (to give the movie a more patriotic flavor), and they decided that the play’s hit song *Buckle Down, Winsocki* would only be sung at the end where it would provide a rousing finale for the movie. The writers also felt it would be better if the story’s male lead sang the final song.

Trivia:

– In addition to their score for *Best Foot Forward*, Hugh Martin and Ralph Blane composed music and lyrics for a number of other M–G–M musicals including *Broadway Rhythm*, *Meet Me in St. Louis*, and *Ziegfeld Follies*. Their most popular song was the Christmas carol *Have Yourself a Merry Little Christmas*. Both men were inducted into the Songwriters Hall of Fame in 1983.

Arthur Freed was convinced that Tommy Dix was the only person who could do justice to *Buckle Down, Winsocki*, and as it happened he had something else in mind for Gil Stratton, the male lead of the Broadway show.

Mickey Rooney and Judy Garland were preparing to make their last movie together, *Girl Crazy*. The actor Ray MacDonald had been scheduled to play Mickey's roommate in the movie, but Ray had gone into the Army and was unavailable. Because of the war, Hollywood was short of leading men, so in November 1942, Arthur Freed decided to have Gil Stratton play Mickey's roommate in *Girl Crazy*, and move Tommy Dix into the leading role in *Best Foot Forward*. Both movies would be shot at about the same time on the back lot of the M-G-M studios, but only *Best Foot Forward* would be shot in Technicolor.

Trivia:

- In 1943 Hollywood's major companies released 289 feature length films. Only 10 of them were filmed in color. Of those 10, four were from M-G-M.

The premise of *Best Foot Forward* is fairly simple. Bud Hooper, a cadet at the Winsocki Military Institute, sends a letter to a movie star inviting her to be his date at the school prom. As a publicity stunt the movie star accepts the invitation and shows up at the school where complications arise. The actress playing the movie star was originally going to be Lana Turner, but when she became pregnant Lucille Ball was given the part.

The Film is a Hit:

The film version of *Best Foot Forward* was shot from January 18 to March 24, 1943. It had its World Premiere at the Astor Theatre in New York City on June 29, 1943, and was released around the country on October 8, 1943. The New York Times called the movie, ". . . a rollicking musical film which pops with hilarious situations, sparkling dialogue and the fresh spirit of youth." The review went on to say that, "Tommy Dix is slightly over-pretty but very amusingly distraught as the hapless hero . . ." Although the musical comedy *Girl Crazy* would make more money for M-G-M that year, *Best Foot Forward* was a solid hit for the studio.

Trivia:

- The final cost of making *Best Foot Forward* was \$1,125,502. It's box office gross receipts were \$2,704,000.
- The final cost of making *Girl Crazy* was \$1,410,850, and its box office receipts were \$3,771,000.

Movie Palace Revues:

Many of the large, ornate movie palaces in major cities around the country presented an elaborate live revue before dimming their lights and showing a first-run feature film. These popular vaudeville shows were a mixture of singers, dancers, and variety acts accompanied by a large orchestra or well-known band. Although Tommy would appear in only one other movie – a small, un-credited part in the Mickey Rooney film *Andy Hardy's Blonde Trouble* – he would become a headline act in many of the revues put on in these beautiful movie palaces. Shortly after *Best Foot Forward* had its premiere, Tommy was invited to appear at the Loew's State Theatre in New York City to help celebrate their 22nd anniversary. He made a lasting impression on the audience when he sang the songs *Great Day, Old Man River*, and *Buckle Down, Winssocki*, and he also made a lasting impression on the show's emcee, Ed Sullivan.

MILITARY SERVICE

The “Army Specialized Training Program”:

In the spring of 1943 a new Army program went into full operation around the country called the “Army Specialized Training Program” (ASTP). It was set-up to identify, train and educate academically-talented enlisted men. After basic training the Army would provide those accepted into the program with a four-year college education in either the sciences, mathematics, medicine, engineering, or linguistics, followed by additional Army training and a commission. They would then be assigned where needed until the war ended.

Sometime after finishing the filming of *Best Foot Forward* in March, Tommy heard about the Army program and felt that if he could pass the tests and get accepted into the program he would be able to finally receive the college education he had always wanted. Tommy easily passed the Army's tests and was classified A-12, the military's designation for high-school students who by pre-induction tests had established their eligibility for the ASTP.

Trivia:

- Two tests were used by the Army to identify people for the ASTP program, the “Army General Classification Test” (AGCT) that tested general learning ability, and the “General Classification Test” (GCT) that measured verbal aptitude. At first a minimum score of 110 was required for acceptance into the program (equivalent to an IQ score of 108), but the minimum score was eventually raised to 115 (equivalent to an IQ score of 112). (The conversion of AGCT scores to equivalent IQ scores can be found in the book *Essentials of Psychology* by Donald M. Johnson.)

Basic Training:

Entering the Army as Private Bob Navard in September 1943, Tommy left the glamour of Show Business and began his required basic training at Fort Benning, Georgia. Very few people knew that Bob Navard was really Tommy Dix, the star of the new M-G-M musical *Best Foot Forward*, and Tommy went out of his way to keep the other people in his regiment from finding out. He wanted to be just one of the guys, and he worked hard to become the best soldier he could be.

During a routine exercise on a steep, narrow path, Tommy fell over a cliff and sustained a number of serious internal injuries. Not wanting to appear weak, he didn't tell anyone about the injuries until they were just too painful to endure. Although the doctors at Ft. Benning quickly identified and took care of Tommy's injuries, he developed a persistent case of diarrhea and began losing weight. Nothing he did or ate seemed to help, but Tommy continued on and never complained.

One person who did discover Tommy's real identity was Vernon Noah, a chaplain on the Army Post who was also a voice-teacher and director of the Highlands United Methodist Church choir in Birmingham, Alabama. He asked Tommy if he would consider performing at the church if the chaplain could get him a weekend pass. Like anyone else going through basic training, Tommy would do almost anything for a weekend pass and he quickly agreed.

Trivia:

– By road, Fort Benning, Georgia, is 150 miles from Birmingham, Alabama.

Singing in Birmingham:

News that Tommy was going to appear at the church in Birmingham, Alabama, somehow got out, and hours before he arrived the church began filling up with teenagers who had seen the movie *Best Foot Forward*. The movie had recently been released in Birmingham, and so many of Tommy's new fans filled the church that many members of the congregation couldn't get in.

One member of the church who did get in was W.W. "Foots" Clements, a politically influential executive of the Dr. Pepper soft drink company. After Tommy finished singing and signing autographs, Mr. Clements introduced himself and told Tommy he was also the chairman of the Jefferson County War Bond Drive. He pointed out that Tommy could be quite valuable to the war effort if he used his talents and popularity to raise money selling war bonds.

By this time, due to the impending invasion of Normandy and the need for additional manpower in Europe, the Army's ASTP program had been disbanded and Tommy was waiting with the rest of his regiment to be deployed overseas. Taking advantage of a furlough his regiment had just been given, Tommy made some personal appearances on behalf of the War Bond Drive with amazing results. Mr. Clements was now convinced that Tommy Dix was the celebrity he needed to promote the sale of war bonds in his area of Alabama, and he convinced Tommy that Alabama was where he was needed.

After Tommy agreed, it didn't take long for Mr. Clements to pull some strings and get Tommy transferred from his regiment to Fort McClellan in Anniston, Alabama. Using Ft. McClellan as his base, Tommy traveled around central Alabama drawing large audiences and selling a great many war bonds.

Trivia:

– Over the course of the war 85 million Americans purchased bonds totaling approximately \$185.7 billion.

Tommy Falls in Love:

One of the venues where Tommy held rallies to sell bonds was the Alabama Theatre in Birmingham. During one rally a young girl was sent up to the stage by her father to purchase a \$1,000 war bond. She was a striking, blonde, blue-eyed, teenager who was attending the Brooke Hill School, a college preparatory school for girls. Tommy saw her and immediately knew she was someone he had to meet.

The young girl was Margaret Ann "Maggie" Grayson, the daughter of a wealthy Birmingham lumberyard owner. Introduced to each other by Stanley Malotte, the organist at the rally, Tommy and Maggie started dating and they quickly fell in love. After he left the Army and reentered Show Business, Tommy repeatedly returned to Birmingham to visit Maggie until she graduated from school in 1946 and they were able to marry.

Medical Discharge:

All during the time Tommy was raising money selling war bonds, the incessant diarrhea that had plagued him since basic training continued. Finally, after his weight had dropped from 130 to 96 pounds, he was hospitalized. While being questioned about his past medical history Tommy admitted to the doctor that he had been diagnosed with Celiac disease when he was a child but never mentioned it to the Army recruiter. The doctor said that the injuries Tommy had incurred during basic training had apparently caused his Celiac disease to flare up, and once again he was unable to properly digest fats and wheat protein (gluten). Since he would need to adhere to a strict diet that the Army could not provide, the

doctor said that Tommy would have to be discharged as soon as they could get him back to his normal weight.

In the spring of 1944 Tommy was sent to the Batty General Hospital near Rome, Georgia, to recuperate. By summer, less than a year after joining the Army, he had regained his normal weight, been given a medical discharge, and was once again a civilian.

PERFORMING ON THE ROAD

Return to Show Business:

After receiving his discharge from the Army, Tommy returned to New York City. He was soon contacted by Ed Sullivan who wrote a column for the New York Daily News, had a radio show on CBS (“Ed Sullivan Entertains” broadcast live from the *21 Club*), and worked as an emcee for the vaudeville revues at the Loew’s State Theatre on Broadway. Tommy’s singing talent had impressed Ed when they had met a year before, and he asked Tommy if he would sing in the Loew’s State Theater’s revue to mark his return to Show Business. Tommy accepted and, on September 7, 1944, Ed Sullivan introduced the “Private with the Sergeant’s voice” from the stage of the prestigious Loew’s State Theatre, and Tommy’s powerful baritone voice once again filled the auditorium.

Through the William Morris Talent Agency, Tommy immediately began getting bookings at the most famous nightclubs and theatres around the country. From the Persian Room at the Plaza Hotel in New York City to The Empire Room at the Palmer House in Chicago to the Golden Gate Theatre in San Francisco; from the Ritz–Carlton Hotel in Boston to the Mayflower Hotel in Washington, DC, to the Roosevelt Hotel’s Blue Room in New Orleans; and from the Earle Theatre in Philadelphia to the “Borscht Belt” resorts in upstate New York to the legendary Last Frontier Hotel in Las Vegas (to name but a few of the venues he played), Tommy was in constant demand as a headline act. For six years he crisscrossed the nation performing in nightclubs, vaudeville shows, supper clubs, country clubs, and at special events.

Trivia:

- At the height of his popularity Tommy was earning \$3,000 a week.
- In 1947 Tommy purchased a powerful Chrysler Town & Country convertible to transport himself from city to city.

The Palmer House:

One venue that Tommy was invited back to repeatedly for as long as three months at a time was the Empire Room at the Palmer House Hotel in

Chicago. The entertainment at The Empire Room was ruled over by Merriell Abbott who produced the shows and provided the “Abbott Dancers” for the show’s chorus line from a dance school she ran. When she first saw Tommy, shortly after he had returned to Show Business, she asked him why he was going to sing *The Lord’s Prayer* during his set. She wondered whether it was appropriate to sing a religious song in a nightclub where drinks were being served. When Tommy explained that he wanted to sing it for “the boys overseas”, she sheepishly agreed to let him do it. Then on opening night when he appeared wearing his usual sport coat, slacks and tie, Merriell asked him where his tuxedo was. When he explained that he didn’t own a tuxedo, she insisted that the next day he find a tailor and have one made. “No one performs at The Palmer House without a tuxedo,” she said.

Tommy went out that night and stopped the show with his renditions of *Old Man River*, and *Buckle Down, Winsoki*. But toward the end of his act, when he sang *The Lord’s Prayer*, everything came to a complete standstill. The song touched the hearts of the war-weary audience, and when the last note faded away they broke into a thunderous standing ovation stopping the show cold in its tracks. When Tommy left the stage Merriell was waiting for him and, with a tear in her eye, she said softly, “Forget what I said. Don’t change a thing.”

Trivia:

- Merriell Abbott was a choreographer, guardian, and ever-watchful mother to her young dancers. She decided who they could date (no orchestra players, please) and even had them weigh-in every Thursday morning to make sure their figures remained trim.
- In 1944 a dinner at the Palmer House’s Empire Room cost \$3.

Marriage:

Despite his hectic schedule, Tommy continued to visit his girlfriend in Birmingham, Alabama, as often as he could, sometimes even overcoming his fear of flying and arriving by plane. Tommy’s career was booming, and by 1946 he was living in an apartment at #1 West 68th Street, facing Central Park.

In the summer of 1946 Tommy Dix and Margaret Ann Grayson were married, and Tommy legally changed his name to Tommy Dix. But even as a newlywed there was no pause in his career, and during their honeymoon on Miami Beach Tommy accepted an invitation to perform at the nearby Kitty Davis’ Airliner nightclub.

Although they were happy and could afford to live quite well (they moved from NYC and settled down in California’s San Fernando Valley), the

frequent separations caused by Tommy's non-stop schedule began to put a strain on their marriage. Because Maggie and their two children (Grayson and Brittain) meant so much to him, sometime in 1948 Tommy began thinking about retiring from the professional stage and taking up a "normal" life.

Edith Fellows:

Thoughts of retirement were put on temporary hold when Freddie Fields, an important theatrical agent with the Music Corporation of America, contacted Tommy and suggested that he team-up with Freddie's wife, Edith Fellows.

Trivia:

- Freddie Fields was the agent for such celebrities as George Burns & Gracie Allen, Dean Martin & Jerry Lewis, and Phil Silvers. Later he handled Judy Garland, Henry Fonda, and Paul Newman among others. In the 1980s he became the CEO of the MGM Film Company.

Edith had been a popular child actress during the 1930s and early 1940s, appearing in almost 50 movies – most notably with Bing Crosby in *Pennies From Heaven* (1936) and a series of four "Five Little Peppers" movies in 1939/1940. She was a versatile actress and an accomplished singer with a beautiful soprano voice. Once she had outgrown juvenile roles she went on the road appearing in regional plays, vaudeville shows, and nightclubs with mixed success.

Trivia:

- Edith Fellows was only 4'10" tall.
- A play about Edith Fellows as a child actress was written by Rudy Benz in 1979. Titled *Dreams Deferred*, the play opened at a small theater in Los Angeles with Edith playing herself.

In 1946 Edith married Freddie Fields, and he eventually decided that teaming her with Tommy would be a good professional move for both of them. In October 1948, Tommy and Edith announced that they would become a team and began preparing an act that combined light comedy with singing. Building the act for almost six months while Tommy continued to perform around the country, they finally opened at the Olympia Theatre in Miami at a benefit concert. Sid Piermont was in the audience, and he immediately offered to book them at the Capitol Theatres in Washington, DC, and New York City. A whirlwind of non-stop bookings at theaters and clubs around the country quickly followed, and the bookings continued in high gear until the middle of the following year when Tommy finally had had enough.

The Latin Quarter:

New York City's *Latin Quarter* was a popular nightclub that Lou Walters opened in 1942 at the corner of 48th Street and Broadway. Modeled somewhat after the Moulin Rouge in Paris, the shows at *The Latin Quarter* featured elaborate settings and costumes, a chorus line of beautiful dancing girls, famous bands, and big-name acts from every area of Show Business. There were also branches of Walters' *Latin Quarter* nightclub in Boston, Miami Beach, and Chicago, and entertainers like Frank Sinatra, Dean Martin & Jerry Lewis, Jack Benny, Milton Berle, and Tony Bennett regularly performed at these clubs intermingled with waves of high-kicking chorus girls.

After Tommy returned to Show Business in 1944, many of his professional engagements were at the New York *Latin Quarter* and its branches. Over time Lou Walters and Tommy became close friends, and when Tommy and Edith Fellows formed their act they were quickly booked at Lou Walter's clubs. At the end of July 1950, while performing at the *Latin Quarter* in New York City, Tommy suddenly announced his retirement from Show Business. Although he and Edith were already booked to play the Flamingo Hotel in Las Vegas, the Coconut Grove in Los Angeles, the Palmer House in Chicago, and the Roxy Theatre in New York City, Tommy realized that continually being on the road had become critically detrimental to his relationship with his family. He decided that he needed to focus on his wife and children, not on his Show Business career. While still one of the most popular headline acts in the country, Tommy Dix called it quits.

Trivia:

- Lou Walters was the father of the journalist Barbara Walters.
- Unlike other nightclubs in NYC at that time, the *Latin Quarter* welcomed families and the club's prices were very modest — a two-dollar minimum and an average dinner tab of eight dollars a person which could include shrimp cocktail, salad, steak, and dessert.
- The productions at the *Latin Quarter* were changed twice a year, and each cost between \$75,000 and \$80,000.

LIFE AFTER SHOW BUSINESS

Embracing Birmingham:

Having said "good-bye" to Show Business, Tommy accepted a position at his father-in-law's lumberyard, and by the fall of 1950 he and his family had moved to Birmingham, Alabama. With the move came an abrupt decrease in his income from \$3,000 per week to \$200 per month plus room

and board. But at last Tommy could come home to his family every night, and he embraced the change.

Tommy became the Associate Minister of Music at a local Baptist Church, and using the G.I. Bill he went back to school and earned an Associate Degree in Architectural Engineering with a minor in Business Law. But there were still opportunities to perform, and he couldn't resist taking advantage of them.

The Call of the Stage:

In 1950 James Hatcher, an instructor in speech at the University of Alabama, brought together a group of University alumni who were interested in forming a community theater in Birmingham. The group, made up mostly of volunteers, took the name "Town and Gown". Using various venues around Birmingham, their first production, *Born Yesterday*, opened at the Masonic Temple on December 7, 1950. It starred Tommy Dix.

In 1955 the "Town and Gown" took up permanent residence in the historic *Little Theater*, which was renovated and renamed the Clark Memorial Theater, and at the beginning of the following year they presented their first musical, *Best Foot Forward*. The now famous composer, songwriter and Alabama native, Hugh Martin, and his sister came in to help stage the production, and Tommy Dix was chosen to lead the cast.

While continuing to work at his day job, first in the lumberyard (where he had become a vice-president) and then as a builder of single-family homes, Tommy took part in almost every form of entertainment the city had to offer. He continued to work with the "Town and Gown" community theater; he was one of the organizers of the Birmingham Civic Ballet Association; he was the director of Birmingham's second annual Christmas Festival at City Hall; he sang in the summer concerts held at Woodrow Wilson Park; he produced and was the Master of Ceremonies for the annual "Music Under the Stars" concerts at Legion Field; and he was even the Master of Ceremonies at the "Miss Alabama Pageant Finals" held in 1954. Tommy was generous with his time and talent, but *only* if it filled a civic purpose.

After Birmingham:

In 1959, after 13 years of marriage, Tommy and his wife divorced and he sadly decided to leave Birmingham and seek his fortune elsewhere. Moving first to Maryland where he helped Panitz Bros. & Company develop the planned community of Joppatowne near the Chesapeake Bay, and then to Sarasota, Florida, where he directed residential building for Rutenberg Homes, Tommy finally settled down along the rapidly expanding southeastern coast of Florida where condominium complexes and subdivisions were being developed on a large scale. These "planned

recreational communities”, that combined ownership with care-free living, attracted Tommy and he started specializing in real estate marketing. Within a few years he had become the project manager for the state’s two largest subdivisions, played a leading role in the marketing and sales of some of southeastern Florida’s most important developments, and innovated a number of marketing and design approaches that put him at the top of his field.

The Society of Athens:

In 1975 Tommy formed an intellectual discussion group at Palm-Aire, one of his resort-condominium projects in Pompano Beach. He named the discussion group “The Society of Athens” to reflect the spirit of the Golden Age of Greece when the pursuit of truth and reflection upon abstract ideas was valued and encouraged. Growing out of his lifelong commitment to the study and understanding of science, philosophy, and religion, Tommy wanted to offer residents an outlet for their intellectual curiosity. He felt strongly that, “For too long a glaring omission in retirement communities has been the lack of accommodation for the people who wish to remain intellectually viable.”

Meeting the second and fourth Sunday of every month, and with Tommy as the moderator, “The Society of Athens” sometimes drew over 100 people to their discussions. The topics ranged from “Love, Sex, and the New Society” to “What is Happiness?” According to the rules set-up by Tommy, members had to stick to universals rather than talking subjectively, and not lash out at the ideas of others. “The *raison d’être*,” he wrote, “is to provide a forum for free and uninhibited philosophical discussion, on subjects vital to the human condition, for those who feel at home in an intellectually challenging environment, and to provide a place where one is apt to meet others of similar inclination.”

Still Singing:

Although Tommy had little time for outside activities when he was working in real estate, he did make time on a few occasions to share his singing talent. In the early 1980s Tommy was featured at the annual “Salute to America” summer concerts put on by the Boca Raton Pops Orchestra. According to the *Boca Raton News*, “*The audience was hypnotized by the deep, dulcet tones of the former movie star turned realtor.*” The newspaper went on to say that, “*Dix sent chills down everyone’s spines with his impeccable version of Old Man River.*” Tommy also found time in 1985 to perform with the Sunrise Musical Theatre in Sunrise, FL. But, as in Birmingham, he continued to perform only as an unpaid volunteer. “I love it too much to sell it,” he said. Throughout his life Tommy was always ready and willing to freely lend his talents for any civic cause.

Retirement:

Eventually the time came for Tommy to retire. He had lived a full life first as a very successful entertainer on stage, screen and radio, and then as a very successful realtor; quite an accomplishment for someone who began life as a seriously ill young lad growing up in a poor section of New York City.

Tommy now lives happily in a beautiful area of Virginia surrounded by the books and art he collected over his lifetime. The preface to one of those books, *The Autobiography of Bertrand Russell*, might well have been written by Tommy himself:

Three passions, simple but overwhelmingly strong, have governed my life: the longing for love, the search for knowledge, and unbearable pity for the suffering of mankind. These passions, like great winds, have blown me hither and thither, in a wayward course, over a deep ocean of anguish, reaching to the very verge of despair.

I have sought love, first, because it brings ecstasy - ecstasy so great that I would often have sacrificed all the rest of life for a few hours of this joy. I have sought it, next, because it relieves loneliness - that terrible loneliness in which one shivering consciousness looks over the rim of the world into the cold unfathomable lifeless abyss. I have sought it, finally, because in the union of love I have seen, in a mystic miniature, the prefiguring vision of the heaven that the saints and poets have imagined. This is what I sought, and though it might seem too good for human life, this is what - at last - I have found.

With equal passion I have sought knowledge. I have wished to understand the hearts of men. I have wished to know why the stars shine. And I have tried to apprehend the Pythagorean power by which number holds sway above the flux. A little of this, but not much, I have achieved.

Love and knowledge, so far as they were possible, led upward toward the heavens. But always pity brought me to earth. Echoes of cries of pain reverberate in my heart. Children in famine, victims tortured by oppressors, helpless old people a hated burden to their sons, and the whole world of loneliness, poverty, and pain make a mockery of what human life should be. I long to alleviate the evil, but I cannot, and I too suffer.

This has been my life. I have found it worth living, and would gladly live it again if the chance were offered me.