

Reflections On An Afternoon With "Red" Skelton

By Tommy E. Sawyer, 32°

Masonry opens doors, including opportunities to meet members of the Craft who have utilized their God-given talents to promote Masonry, harmony, and goodwill.

I'm sure you will conclude you have met many who possess these traits. You certainly know one I met — Brother "Red" Skelton, 33°!

After proceeding through proper channels with his staff, I received a letter in June 1984 granting me a 30-minute interview with Brother Skelton, who was performing at the State Fair Hall in Dallas and meeting separately with over 150 people from around the world, all interested in purchasing his original art pieces.

During breakfast, I learned he was born on July 18, 1913, in Vincennes, Indiana, where he was raised a Master Mason in Vincennes Lodge No. 1 on September 20, 1939. His acting career began at age 10 in a "medicine show." Next came minstrel shows, showboats, and later a job as a clown with the Hagenbeck & Wallace Circus.

In 1937, he made his New York Broadway debut, and that same year, he was featured on the Rudy Valle radio show.

Glancing at my watch, I noticed I had only about 10 minutes left in the interview when I noticed he appeared to have lost something. He asked me if I would accompany him to his room to help him look for his gold neck chain. There, he seemed much more relaxed and began to demonstrate his most unique style in talking about his career in the movies, 48 in all.

I asked him which show business personalities he enjoyed working with the most. His answer: "I have had the pleasure of working with many talents in radio, TV, and the movies; but I would say the ones that really stood out were Ed Wynn, Mickey Rooney, Vincent Price, and the always funny Martha Raye."

I was interested in what a typical day was like in his life. First, he rises at 5:30 am, showers, shaves, and sits down to write his wife, Lothian, a "love letter." He spends the rest of the day making appearances and planning his travel agenda, still finding time to keep abreast of his business pursuits. He watches TV until 10:00 pm, and then he goes to his study to work on his famous clown paintings and other artistic projects until about 1:00 am. Four or five hours of sleep are all he requires.

Asked where he lives and did Lothian have any hobbies, he replied they reside in Anza, California. She raises thoroughbred horses but manages to accompany him on some road trips. Also, she is a great support for him as she helps him with his comic materials.

I asked about the comic characters he had invented to entertain so many millions of fans throughout his career, those hilarious routines and skits he performed on and often wrote for his radio and TV programs. I began to name those characters - Clem Kidittlehopper, Willie LumpLump, the Mean Little Kid, California Pug and, of course, Freddie the FreeLoader. He said these characters gave him the opportunity to relive his childhood. He noted that a little bit of the personalities he portrayed was found in each of us. An interesting comment was that he liked all the characters the same - no favorites. A point I found interesting was his comment concerning "The Mean

Little Kid" routine with its famous punch line, "If I dood it, I get a whipping." He wasn't using it anymore in his skits because another Mason, General Jimmy Doolittle, 33°, Grand Cross, made headlines during World War II with the statement "Doolittle dood it," commenting on his famous air attack over Tokyo.

Brother Skelton's military career found him on the front lines in Italy in the field artillery unit for 22 months. After the war, he performed over 2,500 shows in Korea and Japan. "Red" returned to Hollywood to make movies with leading ladies Lucille Ball, Esther Williams, and other prominent stars for many more years.

When travelling across the country, he made it a point to visit as many Masonic groups, especially Shrine Temples, as he could, and he asked permission to visit with the clown units - all to make a point. He said children are frightened of people who wear paint, so if the Shrine clowns follow a simple recommendation he uses, their success with children would be overwhelming. When they visit a hospital ward or a room of kids, they should not go directly into the room, but peek around the corner three or four times before entering. This builds trust and confidence!

"Masons are doing a great job helping children, and I would personally like to see more emphasis placed on the DeMolay programs across the country," he said when asked about his thoughts on Masonic activities. His own personal first experience with Masonry occurred in Vincennes, Indiana, when he was seven or eight as he sold papers on a street corner. A man bought a newspaper and tipped him the remainder of a \$5 bill. "Red" asked, "Why did you give me so much money to keep?" The man answered, "I am a Mason and we are taught to give!" "Well, I am going to be a Mason, too, when I grow up," "Red" stated. "Oh, Sonny, you mean you are going to try to be a Mason." This conversation stayed with Brother Skelton all his life.

His Masonic career is most interesting. Aside from his membership in Vincennes Lodge No. 1, he holds membership in both the Scottish and York Rite Bodies. He was the recipient of the General Grand Chapter's Gold Medal for Distinguished Service in the Arts and Sciences. On September 24, 1969, he was coroneted an Inspector General Honorary Thirty-third Degree in Boston, Massachusetts, by the Northern Masonic Jurisdiction of the Scottish Rite. Also, he's a member of the Al Malaikah Temple in Los Angeles, California, and he received the Grand Lodge Award of Gold from the Grand Lodge of Indiana in 1993.

Our beloved Masonic Brother died September 24, 1997, and was buried at Forest Lawn Cemetery in Glendale, California. He will be missed! As the lives of millions of others had been enriched by knowing "Red" Skelton, so was mine that afternoon for the three hours I spent with this outstanding humanitarian and Brother. His success, no doubt, revolved around his love and understanding of human emotions and people's need for laughter and happiness. He left a great path for us to walk. In parting, we exchanged a warm, fraternal handshake, and Brother "Red" said to me, "Tommy, keep smiling-the world needs laughter, a lot of it."

And what about the gold chain? Did we find it? We looked in and under the bed, in the bathroom, and down the hall. Probably, the reader realized long ago that it was in Brother Skelton's coat pocket all the time. His performance at the Music Hall and his art sale were successes. So was my afternoon with Brother "Red" Skelton.

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