

SAN FRANCISCO'S FINEST: "CANDY MATSON, YUkon 2-8209"

by Jack French, © 2002

From [Radio Recall](#), October 2002.

"San Francisco is a mad city, inhabited for the most part, by perfectly insane people, whose women are of remarkable beauty."

- Runyard Kipling, 1895

Kipling's observations of the Bay City, written about a half century before the debut of this radio lady detective, certainly describes her well. But although Candy Matson was very attractive, this private eye-full relied more upon her brains, hard work, and good instincts to solve her cases.



"Candy Matson, YUkon 2-8209" began on NBC in June 1949, but its origin goes back much farther. Its creator, Monty Mohn, and star, Natalie Parks, both had roles in "Hawthorne House," which resembled "One Man's Family." But the former show, despite a 10 year run, was always just a regional broadcast.

Candy Matson illustration
by Timothy Wallace

Monty changed his surname to "Masters" and later did the same to Natalie by marrying her. In the summer of 1947, he created a radio comedy series for them, "Those Mad Masters." It lasted only three months, and listening to the two surviving copies will tell you why. The show was routine, fairly predictable, and not that funny.

Two years later, Monty created another show, this time an adventure show with a detective named Candy Matson in the lead. He had planned to play the lead himself, but his mother-in-law convinced him to change the gender of his P.I. so Natalie got the role.

The audition show, recorded in April 1949, was somewhat different from what the series would become. The title was "Candy Matson, EXbrook 2-9994." This audition episode, "Donna Durham's Death," emphasized the sassy and sexy qualities of this lady detective. Her boy friend, Lee Mallard, a police officer, was helpful but lethargic. Candy's sidekick, Rembrandt Watson, was a drunken photographer. Despite its shortcomings, NBC was impressed enough with Monty's crisp dialogue and authentic Bay area references to green-light the project.

By the time the series debuted on June 29, 1949, several improvements had been made. Mallard, the voice of Henry Leff, was more decisive and got a new first name,

Ray. The character of Watson, portrayed by Jack Thomas, was sobered up and made into an expert in many arcane topics.

The cast and crew Masters assembled remained nearly the same for the two and one half years this series was on network radio. Most of them had known each other in San Francisco for many years. Leff, in addition to acting, ran the radio production course at San Francisco City College. Lou Tobin, a regular on the show, had worked with Monty and Natalie years prior on "Hawthorne House."

Other minor cast members, used almost as a Candy Matson "rep company", included: Helen Kleeb, John Grober, Mary Milford and Hal Burdick. Monty and "Nat" (as the cast called her) shared in the casting decisions. Occasionally Monty would cast a local personality; in the episode titled "Devil in the Deep Freeze" (Nov 10, 1949), a San Francisco opera star, Dorothy Warenskjold, portrayed herself.

The announcer on the series was Dudley Manlove and the organist was Eloise Rowan. The engineer, Clarence Stevens, recorded every episode as the show was transcribed and aired later. Monty was a stickler for air checks and he had hopes of syndicating the series to other markets. There were usually two sound effects men, Bill Brownell and his assistant, Julian "Jay" Rendon, who had first been hired at NBC (on guest relations staff) in 1944 when he was 19 years old. He may be the only surviving member of that cast and crew. Recently he wrote me from San Francisco, "(In 1946) the soundman's spot was offered, and though it wasn't the sought-after announcer's job, it did raise my pay by \$40 a month, from \$195 to \$235. Wow!"

Brownell and/or Rendon worked every Candy Matson show. In addition to the standard items on a soundman's truck, they had devices to imitate a cable car, fog horn, buoys, and various pier sounds. The two soundmen worked many shows, including some for ABC, which shared the building with NBC. While their network pay wasn't great, they got paid extra for doing special commercials. Rendon recalled that his two-days on a Gallo Wine commercial got him the equivalent of a month's pay.

Candy Matson, as one of the few remaining NBC and ABC dramatic shows, was produced in the Radio City Building at the corner of O'Farrell and Taylor Streets in downtown San Francisco. This magnificent structure was built by NBC... by mistake! In 1940 NBC authorized the construction of this new edifice to replace its old facility on Sutter Street. At that time, NBC planned equal staffing in their two West Coast offices, Hollywood and San Francisco.

But by April 1942, when the new building was formally dedicated, NBC had transferred most of their Bay personnel to Hollywood. Virtually all of NBC's network programming on the West Coast was now concentrated in Hollywood, with a much smaller crew in San Francisco. So this beautiful building, with its three-story mosaic mural designed by C.J. Fitzgerald, was San Francisco's last gasp as a radio center. But, at least through the 1940s, despite smaller markets, the building was still busy with full day time programming, most of its studios were regularly in use, and both NBC and ABC employed full orchestras.

When Masters brought his production crew into Radio City in 1949, there were seven studios of various sizes on the second floor, shared by the two networks. Studio A was the largest and could accommodate a few hundred audience members on folding

chairs. As Candy Matson increased in popularity, and more people came to watch the production, it was moved from Studio B or Studio C over to Studio A.

"...Name any prominent Bay City feature and chances are very likely it was featured in at least one episode..."

The series had several distinctive qualities that made it a superb half-hour. Monty Masters turned out one excellent script after another, each one peppered with real San Francisco streets, landmarks, and geographical sites. Name any prominent Bay City feature and chances are very likely it was featured in at least one episode.

Radio references were sprinkled throughout each program, most written in the script, but a few ad-libs were also contributed. In the episode "Jack Frost" (12-19-49) we hear the following:

Client: "I want you to find a man named Jordan."

Candy: "He's on another network."

Client: "I beg your pardon?"

Candy: "Never mind; please continue."

In other episodes, one character might ask another, "Who writes your dialogue?" in such a manner the radio listener can't be sure this was in the script or a quick ad-lib. The show balanced its treatment of serious crimes, usually homicide, with friendly banter among the leads. Mallard was often trying to get Candy to see a "Tex Acuff" movie, but she hated westerns. Rembrandt was usually broke and humorously got Candy to pay his expenses.

The story-lines, while varied in terms of crime and motive, did have a certain structure its fans enjoyed. Candy usually began the plot line with a contact from a new client. She would later consult with Mallard, who would criticize her choices. Later she and Rembrandt would have a brush with some danger, which Candy would resolve. Mallard would "solve" the case, but usually after Candy did.

Within a year of its debut, "Candy Matson, YUkon 2-8209" had accumulated a large and loyal audience. On June 19, 1950, Dwight Newton, the radio critic for The Examiner in San Francisco, came to the studio prior to the show and presented Monty and Natalie Masters with The Examiners' Award for the "Favorite Local Radio Show." His presentation, and their acceptance, was recorded as the beginning of the episode titled: "Symphony of Death."

However, despite its popular acceptance, the series never found a sponsor, and it was a sustaining show for the entire time it was on the air. Obviously by 1950, dramatic radio was being reduced as advertising dollars gravitated toward the new medium of television. Radio personnel from San Francisco were lured to Los Angeles, where they sought work in movies and television.

While Monty Masters did not use any of the NBC orchestra on "Candy Matson" (the sole musician was organist Eloise Rowan) the pranksters in the orchestra did not ignore him. One day, while Monty was otherwise engaged, they lifted his Volkswagen from its parking place, and carried it through the wide front doors of the Radio City building, and left it in the lobby. They topped it off with a "For Sale" sign and then they disappeared, to enjoy their mischief.

Despite the scrupulous accuracy that Monty employed in writing his scripts, including use of real names for all buildings, streets, and other locations, this did not apply to including all of the major groups in San Francisco's population.

"San Francisco parents are advised to look closer to their daughters, for they know not the many dangers to which they are exposed.....and to counsel their sons, for when upon the streets of this gay city, they are wandering among many temptations..." -- B.E. Lloyd, historian (1876)

Of course, "gay city" did not mean the same thing in the 1800s, but by the end of WW II, San Francisco had the largest gay population of any city in the US. While network radio in the late 40s and early 50s would certainly not permit an openly gay character to appear on the air, Masters did manage to "suggest" that Rembrandt Watson was gay. Candy's sidekick was single, middle-aged, fashion photographer who loved opera. If these clues were not enough, Jack Thomas added a slightly feminine flavor to his presentation. Whether many people in Candy's large radio audience caught on is very unlikely. But, if he was gay, Watson was the only radio character that ever appeared on this series.

The other significant minority in San Francisco that received scarce, if any, exposure on "Candy Matson" was the Asian community. In 1950 the Bay City had more Chinese residents than any other city in the world, outside of Asia. One would think that therefore, Asian characters would appear often on a radio show based in San Francisco. But this was not the case. Not one Asian, identified by name or accent, appears in any role in the 14 surviving audio episodes of that series. (In addition to these, 81 scripts from the series are archived at Thousand Oaks Library in Los Angeles, CA but I haven't had a chance to read them yet.)

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But these omissions were but minor flaws in a series that had so many strengths. The writing was superb, mixing taut excitement with generous humor. Every episode included specific, and accurate, descriptions of Bay area geography. The sounds effects, by Bill Brownell and Jay Rendon, were true and timed perfectly, which advanced, but never interrupted, the plot. And the leads on the program were supported by a strong cast of players who boasted an unusual assortment of accents.

By the spring of 1951, the decision was made to terminate the series. Monty wrote the final episode, "Candy's Last Case" which aired on May 21, 1951. This show, which had the independent Candy Matson, gushing like a soap opera ingénue over Mallard's marriage proposal, was not a fitting climax to this otherwise remarkable series.

Many of the cast and crew re-located to Los Angeles, there to seek dwindling radio jobs or find occasional employment in television or film. Monty and Natalie did a little of both. She can be heard selling a Christmas tree to Fibber McGee and she was in a few TV westerns, some with her son, Tom. Jack Webb, who never forgot his San Francisco pals, put her in a few episodes of "Dragnet."

Soundman Bill Brownell tried to make a living at NBC Hollywood, but there was too little work for too many soundmen. He left the industry to go into law enforcement

with a sheriff's department in a neighboring county. His buddy, Jay Rendon, stayed in San Francisco, left show-biz and spent the rest of his working life in the retail business. He is now retired in the Bay area.

Henry Leff had some success in the film industry, with good roles in "Take the Money and Run" and "One is a Lonely Number." Lou Tobin, also the beneficiary of Jack Webb's influence, got a role in his film, "The D.I." [NOTE: Tobin spelled his first name, "Lu", although it seldom appears that way in OTR sources.] Of all the cast members of the radio series, the most successful after moving to Hollywood, was Helen Klee. She got roles on one TV show after another, including "Golden Girls", "Lou Grant Show", "Bonanza", "Get Smart", "The Fugitive", and "Dennis the Menace."



The whereabouts of the radio program's announcer, Dudley Manlove, is not known. His wife, Patty Pritchard, a pretty singer, used to portray "Jane" in a local, daily kid's radio show, "Jolly Bill and Jane" in the 1950s. Her voice can still be heard today in San Francisco, on a local car dealer's commercial.

Monty Masters died in 1969; possibly his alcohol consumption contributed to his early death at age 57. Natalie outlived him by seventeen years, passing away at age 70, in February 1986, survived by her son, Tom. Of the rest of their cast, not much is known, although Harold "Hal" Burdick died in June 1978, at the age of 84.

ADDENDUM

The series exists in audio form, fourteen different episodes in circulation, including the audition show, "Donna Durham Case", and a reprise, which was done in Los Angeles in fall of 1952, "The Fortune Teller" (also referred to as "Allison Gray".)

There is some difficulty in identifying the correct titles on the remaining dozen episodes since Monty Masters did not name any episodes. According to the staff at Thousand Oaks Library in CA, the 81 original scripts of this series, donated to their archives by the Masters' estate, contain no identifying data other than broadcast date.

In the intervening years, OTR dealers have attached titles to each episode, although a few shows have come to be marketed under different names. The log below represents the most accurate accounting of the dates (with the most common titles) of the episodes in common currency today.

Apr 4, 1949 (audition) "Donna Durham Case"
Jul 7, 1949 "Cable Car Murder"
Nov 7, 1949 "Devil In Deep Freeze"
Dec 19, 1949 "Missing Jack Frost"
Dec 26, 1949 "Valley of the Moon"
Jan 2, 1950 "NC 9-8012"
Feb 13, 1950 "Eric Spaulding Concert"
June 19, 1950 "Symphony of Death" (also called "Death in F-sharp")
Sep 11, 1950 "Murder on the Movie Set" (also called "The Movie Company")
Oct 9, 1950 "Fort Ord Story"
Oct 23, 1950 "Egyptian Amulet"
Dec 18, 1950 "San Juan Baptista Mission"
May 21, 1951 "Candy's Last Case"
Sep 21, 1952 (reprise) "The Fortune Teller"
(also called "Allison Gray")

REFERENCES

- 1) Barbara Watkins, in SPERDVAC "Radiogram", March 1986, obituary of Natalie Masters
- 2) John F. Schneider, in SPERDVAC "Radiogram" March 1992, "San Francisco's Network Radio"
- 3) Jay Hickerson's "Necrology: OTR Personalities" 1996 and 1997 editions
- 4) Julian "Jay" Rendon, personal correspondence (May 2001 to present)
- 5) Encyclopedia Britanica, "History of California"
- 6) Jeanette Berard, Special Collections Staff, Thousand Oaks, CA Library System, personal correspondence, Sep 2002
- 7) Audio copies of all existing "Candy Matson" programs.