

THE WOLFE PACK

www.nerowolfe.org

REX STOUT AND THE MEDIA by John McAleer

Less than two months before he died, Rex Stout was making preparations to appear on the CBS program "AM America," to promote A Family Affair. He was not looking forward to the stress it would put him under but he was realistic about it. "I've been told it will mean an increase in sales of ten thousand books," he said, "so I don't have much choice." He never made the broadcast, however, a sudden decline in health intervening to make the prospect of soaring sales a matter of indifference to him and to all those who loved him.

Although Rex rarely watched television and, indeed, consented to have a television set in the house only in the last year of his life, when it was no longer possible for him to be physically present at baseball games, he came to concede that watching a televised game was better than not seeing it at all. But he did a lot of radio work during WW II, and was, in fact, for a few years, one of radio's top celebrities. He had less enthusiasm for television probably because he found it difficult to memorize scripts. When he could hold forth on his own, however, he was fine.

Right now several Stout enthusiasts are making an effort to locate videotapes and kinescopes of appearances Rex Stout did make on television. If any of our readers have such materials in their possession we would be happy to hear from them. The Burns Library, at Boston College, where Rex's personal papers and library are housed, would like to add them to the Stout Collection, and to make them accessible to all those who have a legitimate interest in this material.

One correspondent, Bill Vandewater, is looking for two items that would seem to hold great promise. One is a program on which, according to TV Guide, Rex appeared, on CBS-TV, at noon, on Sunday, 5 April 1959. It was a taped program called "Last Word," a panel show. The Guide summed it up in these terms: "Rex Stout, mystery writer, and Russell Lynes, social critic and magazine editor, join regular panelist." If memory serves, Clifton Fadiman was the host and Rex appeared on this program on more than one occasion. Words, their origin, meaning, and usage, was the show's topic, a subject made to order for Rex who often told me that no writer amounted to anything who did not have a strong sense of word choice. Even at eighty-nine he discouraged his secretary from using the dictionary, preferring that she would consult him when she ran into a problem. He wore out more than one copy of Roget's Thesaurus of the English Language in Dictionary Form and, by that time, was himself a walking thesaurus.

A long entry in TV Guide for 3 February 1957 describes a program that Sherlockians as well as Neronians would find collectible. It was an "Odyssey" program, hosted by Charles Collingwood. Its topic? The Baker Street Irregulars. Viewers saw it at 4:00 p.m., on CBS. The Guide relates:

"All of today's show is devoted to Sherlock Holmes. Though most people regard Holmes as a merely fictional detective, the creation of Sir Arthur Conan Doyle, the Baker Street Irregulars look at things differently. It's a dogma of the Irregulars that Holmes was, in fact is, a real person, that furthermore Dr. Watson was his actual chronicler, and that Conan Doyle simply acted as an agent for Watson. Today's 'Odyssey' program opens with a film of the annual meeting of the Irregulars in New York City last month where Holmes's 103rd birthday was toasted."

The climax of this meeting comes in a speech by mystery writer Rex Stout, creator of Nero Wolfe. Stout 'reveals' his discovery that an affair of the heart actually took Holmes to New York City during the 1890s and that it was in Brooklyn, not in London, that Holmes studied his celebrated case of 'The Red Headed League.' The one hour program concludes with a full-length live dramatization of this case as it 'actually' took place on this side of the Atlantic.

"Aiding Stout in digging up the facts about Holmes's clandestine visit to our shores are three Irregulars: Dr. Richard Hoffmann, New York psychiatrist; Edgar Smith, retired auto-company executive; and Red Smith, syndicated sports columnist.

"To enhance the 1890s atmosphere there will be films of little-known still photographs of the New York of the day and of the city's police force, to which Holmes gave his help in solving the 'crime.' David Eban wrote today's script. Charles Collingwood is host."

TV Guide concluded the entry with the cast. Holmes was played by Michael Clarke Laurence. Wilson by Donald Marye. Harry Gresham portrayed the remaining member of the three-man cast, Hargreave.

Peter E. Blau announces the discovery of another Stout video appearance which, for the moment at least, appears to be much more accessible. He writes: "During a recent visit to the Library of Congress, I made a pleasant discovery; their archives include a videotape of the 1956 'Omnibus' program that included an appearance by Rex Stout. I arranged to see the tape on one of their viewing machines. The program is nicely done, and Rex obviously had great fun with the show."

Peter Blau provides this additional information, apparently from the Library of Congress's catalogue:

"Omnibus: The Fine Art of Murder "

A 90-minute television series, produced by the Ford Foundation, broadcast by ABC, and presented by Alistair Cooke. On Dec. 9, 1956, the program included a presentation on 'The Fine Art of Murder' (length 40 minutes). According to TV Guide, James Daly narrates and Rex Stout plays himself in a play in which murder occurs and then is solved in different ways by some detective story writers and their heroes. Script by Sidney Carroll. Cast: James Daly (narrator) , Felix Munso (Edgar Allan Poe), Herbert Voland (M. Dupin), Dennis Hoey (Sir Arthur Conan Doyle), Robert Eckles (Nero Wolfe), Gene Reynolds (Archie Goodwin), Rex Stout (himself). References (held): The Armchair Detective, winter 1981, p. 23 (John McAleer, quoting Kayleen Sybrandt) ; Rex Stout Journal, Spring 1985, pp. 15-16.

"Listed by Larry James Gianakos in TELEVISION DRAMA SERIES PROGRAMMING: A COMPREHENSIVE CHRONICLE, 1947-1959 (Metuchen: Scarecrow Press, 1980, p. 332).

"Wesleyan University has a kinescope film of the program."

"...Today's 'Odyssey' program opens with a film of the annual meeting of the Irregulars in New York City last month where Holmes's 103rd birthday was toasted. "