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Biography



Bill Cullen

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On a 1977 episode of **To Tell The Truth**, Bill said his full name was "William Lawrence Francis Cullen". We've not seen a reference to the "Francis" part in any other source.



Bill wrote about his limp in a 1957 magazine article:

"Like thousands of other youngsters, I was stricken with polio as a child. Even with the wonderful care I received from my parents and doctors, I still carry the scars of this experience. Somehow, it never got me down. That's why I would rather not have people who see me limp along show any pity, distress or compassion - since I don't feel this

William Lawrence Cullen was born in Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania on February 18th, 1920. At 18 months of age, Bill developed polio and was left with a permanent limp (something he later tried to hide on camera with varying degrees of success). He wore a brace on one leg until he was ten.

He attended South High School in Pittsburgh, where he earned a reputation for entertaining antics. He hosted student assemblies, clowning at school spelling bees, organized fund-raising shows and published his own school paper when he disagreed with the policy of the official one. He got along without the brace, but he was not allowed to take part in high school sports. "I did fine on the back lot," he said later. "Maybe I ran a lot slower, but I hit the ball a lot harder."

Another harrowing experience of Bill's early life was an automobile accident in his junior year of high school, which put him in the hospital for nine months. In fact, some early profiles of Bill do not make mention of his polio and instead suggest that his limp resulted from the accident.

During his senior year and despite the earlier accident, he developed an interest in midget auto racing, one of the scores of hobbies he would pursue over his life. At one point he dropped out of high school and briefly raced professionally, but under pressure from his parents he went back for his diploma. He later attended the University of Pittsburgh, where he studied medicine.



To pay tuition, Bill went to work in his father's garage. While changing tires and tuning engines, he kept customers and co-workers entertained with his impressions of well known radio personalities. Bill first got the chance to perform for a radio audience on the **1500 Club**, an overnight program on tiny **WWSW** in Pittsburgh. He began as a frequent, though unpaid guest on the program, eventually working his way into a position as a salaried announcer.

Like most employees of a small station, Bill handling a variety of roles including news, record spinning and sports coverage. He later moved to the larger station **KDKA** where his duties included hosting a local variety show. During at least part of that time, Bill continued to take classes at the University of Pittsburgh. Several profiles say that he ended up earning a B.A. degree in fine arts. However, others say he dropped out before receiving a degree.

He moved to New York in 1944 and almost immediately was hired by CBS

way about my physical condition."



Bill and Oscar winning actor Jack Palance were born the same day. He also shares a birthday (though obviously not the same year) with game show icon Vanna White.

Other famous personalities born February 18:
 Queen Mary I
 Alessandro Volta
 Wendell Wilkie
 Andres Sergovia
 Kim Novak
 Toni Morrison
 Milos Forman
 Yoko Ono
 Cybill Shepherd
 John Travolta
 Molly Ringwald



A 1988 **Los Angeles Times** article about a "Car Wash for the Stars" featured an interview with Bill. He drove a 1979 Cadillac Seville.



Speaking to radio personality Alan Colmes in 1988, in what was probably his final interview, Bill had a pretty jaded view of modern game shows:

"I don't enjoy television as much as I used to. It's not as much fun. There's a lot of greed today, it seems. A lot of business administration aspirants coming along. They used to play it for fun, to get on the air and have their friends see them. You'd give them a thousand dollars and you made their year. Now, unless it's twenty or thirty thousand dollars, they look at you like you suckered them into a deal that really didn't

as an announcer. Modestly, he said, "I only got the job because all the top guys were in the Army." During this early period in his career Bill also did some writing, creating quips for the likes of Arthur Godfrey, Milton Berle and Danny Kaye.

In 1946 he got his first big break filling in as the host of the radio quiz **Winner Take All**. That program was not only notable as the show that launched Bill's career, it was also the first program produced by the new partnership of Mark Goodson and Bill Todman. Bill's association with their company would span almost forty years.



Bill married three times in his life, though the first two were brief. According to Pittsburgh colleague Joe Tucker, Bill's first marriage was to a cousin at the insistence of his mother. That union lasted only two years and was not a happy one. According to Tucker, Bill claimed never even to have consummated it. After moving to New York, Bill met singer Carol Ames when he was an announcer for a radio series on which she appeared. They married on July 30, 1949. Carol had also been a singer on the Arthur Godfrey program and in New York nightclubs, and she continued to perform in the Manhattan area during their marriage. They lived in an apartment on New York's East side. That marriage ended some time in 1955.

Bill met the former Ann Macomber in the summer of 1955, during which time he was commuting to California once a week to host **Place the Face**. Ann was a model and TV actress based on the west coast, but gave up that career and moved with Bill to New York. Ann's sister married Jack Narz, another popular game show host of the fifties and Bill's announcer on **Place The Face**. Ann and Bill were married on Christmas Eve, 1955 and moved into an apartment overlooking the East River. In the spring of 1959, Bill and Ann moved to a larger apartment facing Central Park. Their marriage lasted the rest of Bill's life. Ann would occasionally appear with Bill on the sets of his shows.



As popular as he continued to be into the seventies and eighties, Bill's greatest success professionally probably came in the late fifties. He was the host of **Pulse**, the four-hour NBC radio program which aired live from 6 to 10am. After hosting that morning program, he headed up the street to NBC's TV studio where he hosted **The Price Is Right** from 11 to 11:30. He also hosted the nighttime version of **The Price is Right** AND played **I've Got A Secret** once a week. He even found time during the week to record a two-hour Saturday version of **Pulse**. That's a total of 25 1/2 hours of programming a week, virtually all of it live.

turn out as well as they perhaps had hoped."

The rewards of such a busy schedule were enormous. By 1958 he was making \$300,000 a year, a fortune at the time, which made him one of the highest paid TV performers in the country. He was also a major star, appearing on the covers of **TV Guide** and other entertainment magazines.



Among Bill's hobbies were photography (he owned tons of equipment and took literally thousands of pictures of his wife Ann), interior decorating, model plane building, painting (water color and oils), magic, music (he tried to learn saxophone and guitar), raising fish and writing plays and poetry. Of all his hobbies, though, his passion was flying.

Bill earned a pilot's license in his teens, but his interest in flying became more serious during World War II. Rejected by the armed services due to his childhood bout with polio, Bill served in the Civil Air Defense as an instructor and patrol pilot in his native Pennsylvania. He owned a Ryan Navion four-seater plane, the same type flown by fellow enthusiast Arthur Godfrey. Later, he owned a different four-seater, a Beechcraft Bonanza. In 1950, with several planes, he incorporated a flying business called Appointment Airlines. That endeavor lasted only two years and was a financial failure, costing Bill about \$30,000. Bill continued to be a devoted flier well into the 1970s.

Into the sixties, Bill's schedule settled into "only" hosting six episodes of **The Price Is Right** a week, as well as panel duties on **I've Got A Secret**. He dabbled in other TV and radio pursuits, including sports coverage, perhaps in an effort to break out of being pegged as just a game show host. However, by the seventies his efforts were almost totally in game shows.

The seventies saw a slow migration of game show production from New York City to the newer and larger facilities of California studios. Bill was among the last of the major game show hosts to make the move to Los Angeles, in part because of his long-time association with producer Bob Stewart, who also resisted relocating to the west coast. By the beginning of the next decade, both faced reality and joined their colleagues in California.



In Bill's later years he was as popular a choice as ever to host new games, despite a growing desire by network executives to locate newer, younger talent. In a 1984 **TV Guide** article, Bill described how networks and packagers would start out looking for a fresh face, but eventually come around to choosing him again and again. In the 1980s he

worked for three of the major game show production companies (Goodson-Todman, Barry-Enright and Bob Stewart) even as fewer and fewer game shows were being produced.

After his final series, **The Joker's Wild**, left the air in the fall of 1986, Bill quietly retired from television. His last televised appearance was as a celebrity guest on **The \$25,000 Pyramid** (alongside fellow game show legend Betty White) the following June. A lifetime of smoking began to take its toll. In 1990 he learned he had lung cancer, and on July 7, he died of complications from that terrible disease.

His peers remembered him fondly. Dick Clark said, "Bill was the ultimate host. He had the great talent of making his job look easy." Pat Sajak called him "a broadcaster's broadcaster", adding, "He was a gentle and gracious man, yet had a biting wit. Because Bill was so good and made it look so easy, I don't think he ever received all the recognition due him." Monty Hall said, "Of all the emcees, Bill had great class. Great intelligence and great class."