

## HAROLD (HAL) PEARY

Harold (Hal) Peary (born Harrold José Pereira de Faria, July 25, 1908 – March 30, 1985), an American actor, comedian and singer in radio, film, television and animation, with an unmistakable, booming voice, who is remembered best as the title character of the popular radio comedy series *The Great Gildersleeve*.

Born in San Leandro, California to Portuguese parents, Peary (pronounced Perry) began working in local radio as early as 1923, according to his own memory, and had his own show as a singer, *The Spanisher Serenader*, in San Francisco, but moved to Chicago, Illinois in 1937. In Chicago his radio work included *Fibber McGee and Molly*, where he originated the Gildersleeve character as a Fibber McGee neighbor and nemesis in 1938 and went through several first names and occupations before settling on Throckmorton P. He also worked on the horror series *Lights Out* and other radio programs.

Peary's Gildersleeve proved popular enough that it was thought to try the character in his own show. Gildersleeve was transplanted from *Wistful Vista* to *Summerfield*, situated as slightly less pompous and cantankerous ("You're a haaa-aa-aard man, McGee" was a famous catch-phrase), and considerably more domesticated: he was now raising the orphaned children, Marjorie and Leroy, of his late sister, while tending first his manufacturing company and later *Summerfield's* water supply (as commissioner).

*The Great Gildersleeve* premiered August 31, 1941 and became a steady hit for the rest of the decade, Peary's booming voice and flustered character catchphrases ("You're a brii-iii-iight boy, Leroy!") becoming one of the most familiar American radio presences. In the episode "Mystery Voice" [5/10/1942] Peary reprises somewhat his "Spanish Serenader" persona, by appearing on a local radio program as the masked singer "Ricardo from Brazil". "Ricardo" highlights both Peary's range of talent as well as his Portuguese heritage, although at some times "Ricardo" speaks Spanish ["Muchas gracias"], rather than Portuguese ["Muito obrigado"]. A bit of an "Easter egg" in this episode is the performance of Mel Blanc as the radio station manager and a policeman.

Thanks to four films during the 1940s, he was a pleasant big-screen presence as well. In 1950, however, the magic ride ended when Peary jumped to CBS amidst that network's legendary talent raids. He believed *The Great Gildersleeve* would jump with him, but it proved to be the biggest mistake of his career.

Peary and the show's producer and sponsor, Kraft Foods, fenced over his desire to have more singing spots on the show. He was a fine singer in the

prewar crooning style, but the show's producers didn't think it melded with his comic persona.

Radio historian Gerald Nachman, in *Raised on Radio*, said Peary and his agent, MCA, had negotiated fruitlessly to get Peary a stake in the show's ownership.

When CBS began luring Jack Benny (also an MCA client) and others away from NBC, mostly by offering the performers better capital-gains terms against the still-high postwar U.S. taxes than NBC was willing to do, Peary listened and signed with the network.

The problem was that Kraft wasn't willing to make the move with him, and they had a replacement in the wings, Willard Waterman, whose voice resembled Peary's.

To his credit, Waterman---who had known Peary since their early radio days in Chicago---refused to appropriate the famous Gildersleeve laugh, believing Peary alone should have title to that trademark. Gildersleeve without Peary struggled on a few more radio years (by its final season, listeners heard only repeat broadcasts of earlier episodes) and bombed on television.

Peary began a new CBS situation comedy, *The Harold Peary Show*. It is sometimes known as *Honest Harold*---but that title actually belonged to the fictitious radio show Peary's new character hosted. As Nachman and others observed, *The Harold Peary Show* came across a little too much like "*Gildersleeve Lite*"---an impression only enhanced when Shirley Mitchell, who'd played love interest Leila Ransom on *Gildersleeve*, joined the cast---and it lasted only a year.

Peary played Gildersleeve in four films in the 1940s, making his feature film debut in *Comin' Around the Mountain* (1940) as Mayor Gildersleeve. Although this film is not available commercially on DVD or VHS, there was a public showing September 2007 at the Mid-Atlantic Nostalgia Convention in Aberdeen, Maryland.

In addition to roles in such films as the Walt Disney movie *A Tiger Walks* (1964) and the Elvis Presley entry *Clambake* (1965), he also worked in television situation comedies, playing Herb Woodley on the TV version of *Blondie*, Mayor LaTrivia in the TV version of *Fibber McGee and Molly*, and periodic guest slots on *The Dick Van Dyke Show*, *Petticoat Junction*, and even *The Brady Bunch*. In the 1970s, Peary was featured in one of the most popular TV ads for Faygo Pop. The last lines of the song featured in the commercial which intent was to associate Faygo pop with one's nostalgia: "Remember

when you were a kid? Well, part of you still is. And that's why we make Faygo." Peary never became even half the star on television that he had been in radio. As it turned out, his radio stardom telegraphed his future: Peary's true post-Gildersleeve living proved to be his magnificent voice talent; he spent most of the rest of his life voice-acting in animated work by Rankin-Bass, Hanna-Barbera and others.

Harold Peary died of a heart attack at the age of 76. But thanks to its sponsor's numerous recordings at their original time of broadcast, The Great Gildersleeve has proven one of the most popular finds among those who become old-time radio fans, even among those who weren't even born when Peary made his last appearance in the role he made a legend.