

# **Paul Mills Rhymer**

## **Classroom Resource Packet**

1. Student Biography of Paul Mills Rhymer
2. Vocabulary List
  - a. Vocabulary words are pulled from the student biography, the actors' scripts, and the Character Information portion of our Guide Script. Words are organized alphabetically.
3. Supplemental Resources
  - a. "Radio whiz Paul Rhymer put Twin Cities on the air" by Bill Kemp
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# Paul Mills Rhymer

1905-1964

Paul Mills Rhymer was born in Fulton, Illinois on November 21, 1905. He was the eldest son of Sidney and Mabel (Gale) Rhymer. By 1911, the Rhymer family had moved to Bloomington, Illinois, settling in a house at 708 ½ West Monroe Street where Sidney began working for the **Chicago and Alton (C & A) Railroad**.

It appears that Paul was drawn to entertainment from an early age. When examining an old diary of his in 1937, Paul noted that he spent an “**appalling**” amount of time at the movies during his youth – spending a nickel a day at the Scenic Theater, located at 302 North Madison Street in Bloomington. Paul also developed an interest in writing and engaging with music during his youth, participating in a writing club and the orchestra while he attended high school.

Following his graduation from Bloomington High School in 1925, Paul attended Illinois Wesleyan University (IWU). When Paul first began his career at IWU in 1926, he was involved in the English Coffee Club. As a member of that club, Paul participated in guest **lectures**, directed short plays for the club members, and wrote papers of his own. He also began writing for *The Argus*, IWU’s student newspaper.

The highlight of Paul’s college writing career came when his short story, “Hen,” was sold and published by the popular magazine “College Humor.” “Hen” told the story of Bill, a physically **disfigured** railway worker, who told, what appeared to be, **fictitious** stories to account for his **shortcomings** in life. Throughout the story, the reader learns that Bill’s stories are truthful. Outside of writing organizations, Rhymer was involved in Sigma Chi **Fraternity** and Phi Kappa Phi Honor Society.

However, in 1929 it was necessary for Paul to drop out of IWU and return home to help his widowed mother in Bloomington. Two years prior, Paul’s father, Sidney Rhymer, passed away from pneumonia in 1927 at the age of 51.

1929 was a busy year for Paul, as he jumped from odd job to odd job before finally landing in radio. Paul then began his one and only career in newspaper writing for *The Pantagraph*. For two months Paul was a visiting reporter in Bloomington. His job required him to call around the Bloomington area looking for personal information on its residents. Rather than fulfill his job description, Paul spent his workdays back at the Sigma Chi house at IWU and used the house phone to call the parents of fellow Sigma Chi members to get the latest gossip from around Bloomington. In doing so, Paul produced fake stories using the information that had been shared with him. Paul’s hijinks worked for about two months until Bloomington residents began to complain that Paul never met with them, and that the information reported in the pages of the *Pantagraph* was inaccurate. As a result, Paul was fired from *The Pantagraph*.

It was also in 1929 that Paul moved to Chicago. He worked a variety of jobs including selling magazines and working as a taxicab driver before landed a career in radio. Paul’s first success at NBC occurred with the radio show *The Keystone Chronicle* in December 1929. The show also included the experiences of those living in the small town, specifically the hardware store owner, farmer, a country agent, as well as other members of the community who happened to stop by the newspaper office.

As *The Keystone Chronicle* (later renamed *The Northwestern Chronicle*) was growing in popularity, so too was Paul Rhymer's new **sketch** *Vic and Sade*. The show served as an "attempt to show everyday American home life" by detailing the lives of the Gook Family. The family included Vic, an accountant of the Consolidated Kitchenware Company, his wife, Sade, as well as Rush, their adopted son.

When Paul first started working on the *Vic and Sade* scripts, he was a bachelor. However, on July 29, 1933, Paul married Marry Francis Murray in Chicago. Following their marriage, they made their home in Chicago. They had one son, Paul Parke Rhymer, who was born on September 20, 1937.

Despite Paul living in Chicago, *Vic and Sade* was firmly **rooted** in Bloomington. Although the show was set in an unnamed, small-town, residents of Bloomington, Illinois began to "...see a remarkable resemblance between the names of streets, telephone exchanges and names...in the programs." So much so, residents of Bloomington began to send in **fan mail** noting such connections.

*Vic and Sade* continued to grow in popularity over the years. As a result, the show, noted as the "Most Popular Air Family," was broadcast over additional radio networks such as WHP and a nationwide Columbia network by May of 1938. The following year, Republic Pictures expressed interest in filming *Vic and Sade*; however, *Vic and Sade* did not grace television until July 1948 – nearly 10 years later! In the meantime, *Vic and Sade* continued on the radio.

By September 1944 *Vic and Sade* left the air ways and signed off for the first time in 12 years. At the time the show had about 7,000,000 listeners and was appreciated for its being "**slanted** with comedy rather than the **trials and tribulations** of family life."

In July 1949, a few months following Paul's mother's death, *Vic and Sade* made their television debut. Although Rhymer continued to write the scripts, Bernadine Flynn (Sade) was the only original cast member to join him on the television of the show. The rest of the cast was replaced with Frank Dane as "Vic" and Dick Conan as "Rush." Despite Paul Rhymer's quality script writing, the new cast members were not well received, with one newspaper columnist stating that they were not "quite as funny on TV as they were in their great days on the radio."

That being said, the show itself was viewed positively, with the same newspaper reporting that "the old radio programs, converted to television, was as fresh as spring water, whereas the new TV shows are tired before they're born." Despite somewhat positive reviews, the TV debut of *Vic and Sade* did not result in a long-term television series, as the show concluded after three weeks' worth of episodes.

Throughout his life, Paul also maintained his connection to Bloomington. One way he did was through his support of the Bloomington High School Short Story Club. He donated the "Paul Rhymer Medal," which was awarded to the student who wrote the year's best short story. In addition to this, Paul also maintained relationships with his Sigma Chi fraternity brothers by attending sporting events together and IWU's homecoming. Although, his connection with Sigma Chi was expressed through close personal connections, Paul continued to be remembered by his fraternity as demonstrated by Sigma Chi's involvement on "Paul Rhymer Day."

Paul Rhymer passed away on October 26, 1964, at the age of 59 in Passavant Hospital in Chicago. Paul had been in poor health for a few years prior to his death after suffering multiple heart attacks. On the evening of October 26, 1964, he suffered a severe **stroke** and died shortly

thereafter. Paul's funeral took place at Graceland Cemetery Chapel in Chicago, and he was laid to rest at Lexington Cemetery, in Lexington, Illinois where he would later be joined by his wife, Mary.

## Vocabulary

**Abridged (adjective):** shortened or condensed especially by the omission of words or passages.

**Allowance (noun):** a sum regularly provided for personal or household expenses.

**Appalling (adjective):** inspiring horror, dismay, or disgust.

**Banquet (noun):** a meal held in recognition of some occasion or achievement.

**Bestowed (verb):** to give as a gift or honor.

**Cary Grant (person):** an English-American actor and performer who was active between 1922 and 1966. Grant was born in Bristol, but moved to Hollywood in the 1930s and became one of the most recognized actors of his time.

**Chicago & Alton Railroad (noun):** a railroad that came to Bloomington in 1853 and became one of the largest employers in McLean County. This railroad linked Chicago to St. Louis and made Bloomington a hub for railroad transportation.

**Conducted (verb):** to lead for manage a project or effort.

**Continuity Writer (noun):** someone who creates original written works like scripts, essays, or songs for publication and performance.

**Compulsive (adjective):** taking actions due to a forceful or irresistible urge.

**Denied (verb):** a refusal to grant permission.

**Disabled (adjective):** impaired or limited by a physical, mental, cognitive, or developmental condition: affected by disability.

**Disfigured (adjective):** impaired by deep and persistent injuries.

**Dubbed (verb):** to call by a distinctive title, epithet, or nickname.

**Embellish (verb):** to heighten the attractiveness of by adding decorative or fanciful details.

**Exaggerate (verb):** to enlarge beyond bounds or the truth.

**Fan Mail (noun):** letters and packages sent to famous people and public figures by their fans and admirers.

**Fictitious (adjective):** of, relating to, or characteristic of fiction.

**Fraternity (noun):** a men's student organization formed chiefly for social purposes having secret rites and a name consisting of Greek letters.

**Heralded (verb):** greeted with enthusiasm; to give notice of

**Judicial Branch (noun):** the branch of the government charged with trying court cases.

**Juries (noun):** committees for judging and awarding a prize or verdict, especially in a court of law.

**Lectures (noun):** a discourse given before an audience or class especially for instruction.

**Legacy (noun):** something transmitted by or received from an ancestor or predecessor or from the past; how a person is remembered in the future.

**Levied (verb):** the seizure of one's property or assets to pay off their tax debts.

**Limestone (noun):** a rock that is formed chiefly by accumulation of organic remains (such as shells or coral), consists mainly of calcium carbonate, is extensively used in building, and yields lime when burned.

**Mausoleums (noun):** a usually stone building with places for entombment of the dead above ground.

**Newfoundland Dogs (noun):** a large breed of dog originally bred as working dogs for fishermen in Newfoundland, modern-day Canada. These dogs are large but calm, earning them the nickname of "the gentle giant."

**Obscure (adjective):** relatively unknown, misunderstood, or hidden.

**Ogden Nash (person):** a well-known American poet who was especially gifted at writing humorous poetry. Nash also appeared on other radio and television shows throughout the 1950s.

**President Franklin Roosevelt (person):** the 32<sup>nd</sup> president of the United States from 1933 until 1945. F.D.R. was the only president to serve more than two terms in his lifetime. He was in office during events like the Great Depression and World War II.

**Prohibited (adjective):** not permitted: forbidden by authority.

**Prominent (adjective):** widely and popularly known; readily noticeable.

**Proofreader (noun):** a person who reads a written piece to check for grammatical errors and misspellings.

**Proprietor (noun):** a person who has the legal right or exclusive title to something.

**Resembling (verb):** to be like or similar to.

**Rooted (adjective):** caused by or originating in.

**Shortcoming (noun):** an imperfection or lack that detracts from the whole.

**Sketch (noun):** a short literary composition somewhat resembling the short story and the essay, often comedic in nature.

**Slanted (verb):** to interpret or present in line with a special interest.

**Soap Opera (noun):** a serial drama performed originally on a daytime radio or television program and chiefly characterized by tangled interpersonal situations and melodramatic or sentimental treatment.

**Staunch (adjective):** steadfast in loyalty or principle.

**Stroke (noun):** sudden impairment or loss of consciousness, sensation, and voluntary motion that is caused by rupture or obstruction (as by a clot) of a blood vessel supplying the brain and is accompanied by permanent damage of brain tissue.

**Trials and Tribulations (noun):** difficult experiences or situations that test a person's endurance or self-control.

**Unparalleled (adjective):** having no equal match; unique in quality.

**Vic & Sade (noun):** a sketch radio show written by Paul Rhymer. This segment focused on a typical American family living in a town that closely resembled Bloomington, IL. This comedic show was very popular among listeners and was on the air for over a decade.

**Virtuosity (noun):** great technical skill; being exceedingly good at an activity or skill.

# Radio whiz Paul Rhymer put Twin Cities on air

By Bill Kemp; June 25, 2013



Paul Rhymer glances at a window poster announcing a rare visit to Bloomington. In late April 1938, the radio wunderkind brought the "Vic and Sade" cast to the Consistory (today the Center for Performing Arts) for an evening of entertainment. (For the Pantagraph, McLean County Museum of History)

BLOOMINGTON - During the golden age of radio, one of the smartest, most popular daytime programs was the work of Paul Rhymer, a Bloomington boy made good.

Running from 1932 to the mid-1940s, Rhymer's "Vic and Sade" offered 15-minute vignettes exploring the gentle absurdities of small town, middle-class, Midwestern life.

The show's setup was simple: The comfortably married Vic and Sade Gook (rhymes with "look"), along with their foster son, Rush, would sit around and discourse on matters of no greater consequence than if the sale of washcloths at Yamilton's department store qualified as a "real" bargain.

Vic, voiced by veteran radio hand Art Van Harvey, was a bookkeeper for Plant 14 of the Consolidated Kitchenware Co. And like any dependable family man, he was a dutiful member of a fraternal society, serving as the Exalted Big Dipper in the Drowsy Venus chapter of the Sacred Stars of the Milky Way.



## **Offbeat characters**

Except for an occasional visit from Uncle Fletcher, the show's seemingly endless supporting cast of eccentrics was only talked about, or, on occasion, talked to, as heard in one-sided telephone conversations.

There was Sade's confidant Ruthie Stembottom; divorcee Cora Bucksaddle; Rush's teacher Miss Applerot; the Rev. Kidneyslide; and Rishigan Fishigan of Sishigan, Michigan, who married Jane Payne from Bain, Maine. As evidence of Rhymer's genius, these and dozens of other absurdly named yet fully realized characters were created strictly through dialogue spoken by the four principal cast members.

For local listeners, Rhymer's fictional universe sounded awfully familiar. Although the Gooks lived in the fictional town of Crooper, Ill., there was no mistaking the frequent appearance of Bloomington landmarks, such as Miller Park, People's Bank, and the Chicago and Alton Railroad depot.

"Few home towns have been so profitably exploited, as Bloomington, Ill.," noted a Time magazine article on Rhymer's show.

During its decade-plus run on NBC, Rhymer remained the show's lone writer, pounding out each weekday script several hours before airtime.

"Vic and Sade" fans included literary types like poets Edgar Lee Masters and Ogden Nash, and a Collier's magazine article declared some of Rhymer's sketches "as good as Mark Twain for small-town humor and a true picture of life in the Midwest."

## **Life in Twin Cities**

Born in Fulton, Rhymer spent his childhood and early adult years in the Twin Cities. The Rhymer family lived on West Monroe Street in Bloomington, and later at 414 W. Virginia Ave.

in Normal. Vic and Sade Gook, as the show's announcer noted at the start of each episode, lived on Virginia Avenue in "the small house halfway up the next block."

Rhymer attended Illinois Wesleyan University, where he spent more time telling stories on the steps of the Sigma Chi fraternity house than attending to schoolwork. "He would drop into classes now and then just to see how things were going," it was said.

He never graduated, and instead found work at The Pantagraph as a proofreader and reporter. He was shown the door, though, after editors learned that some of the people quoted in his stories did not, in fact, exist.

After his fabulist inclinations put an end to his local newspaper career, he moved to Chicago, where he landed a position with NBC radio in Chicago.

"Vic and Sade" was considered a soap opera, in that it aired during the weekday and its sponsors, such as Proctor and Gamble, sold household cleaners and the like to a listening audience compromised of housewives.

But it was unlike any soap before or since. Each weekday installment - with titles like "Watch Fob Collection," "Cleaning the Bookcase" and "A Slow Dull Tiresome Evening" - was a virtuoso display of lovingly rendered Midwestern patter. In Rhymer's universe, there was never a denouement or dramatic payoff; instead, his characters found life's reward in the simple pleasures of conversation.

Sadly, only about 330 of the estimated 3,500 "Vic and Sade" installments survive today - less than 10 percent. Yet even with a loss of that magnitude, Rhymer's creation remains with us today, not only in the form of LPs, cassette tapes, compact discs, and MP3 files of original episodes, but also published collections of scripts, the obligatory Web sites - such as <http://vicandsade.net/> - and even an appreciation society.

So download a couple of episodes into your iPod and pay a long-overdue visit to "the small house halfway up the next block."

## Railroads' arrival in 1853 momentous event in city history

By Bill Kemp; June 25, 2013



This 1860 lithograph is the earliest known image of an Illinois Central Railroad passenger depot in Bloomington. Both the passenger and freight depots were located between Grove and Washington streets near what is today the Beer Nuts Inc. plant. (For the Pantagraph, McLean County Museum of History)

**BLOOMINGTON** - A good case could be made for dividing the history of Bloomington into two distinct eras: "Before Railroads," or B.R., and "After Railroads," or A.R.

Railroads first arrived here in 1853 - the Illinois Central in May and the Chicago & Mississippi (later known as the Chicago & Alton) in October. One would be hard pressed to conjure up a more earth-shaking event in the subsequent 155 years of city history.

A landlocked Bloomington, B.R., often relied on river "packets" (regularly scheduled riverboat steamers) that ran between Peoria-Pekin and St. Louis to reach the wider world of commerce. In early 1853, the "new, fast-running" steamer Garden City could make it to St. Louis and back in about five days, "touching at all the intermediate ports along the river."

Many goods and services floated up and down the Illinois, Mississippi and Ohio rivers, so the economic outlook of Central Illinois had a decided southern tilt. For instance, the pages of The Bloomington Intelligencer newspaper (a predecessor of The Pantagraph) published in the

early 1850s were filled with advertisements for firms in St. Louis, Louisville, Ky., and Cincinnati.

Today, given the ascendancy of the automobile and over-the-road trucking, it's difficult to fully appreciate how the railroad changed everything and everyone almost overnight. Railroads, remarked historian Ron Ziel, brought "radical change, unmatched in human history."

The railroad reshaped the Corn Belt's political and cultural landscape in countless ways. Carload after carload of pine from the North Woods, to cite one example, reached the countryside, where wood-starved farmers erected fences, outbuildings and farmhouses. In return, farmers used the railroad to ship corn, hogs and other commodities to Chicago and elsewhere, connecting Central Illinois to national and even international markets.

New towns, such as Towanda, McLean and Gridley popped up along rail lines, while some established settlements, such as Pleasant Hill and Lytleville, which were stranded a mile or two from the new iron highways, withered and died.

The steam locomotive also remade the world of business and finance. For most Central Illinois residents, the railroad represented their first contact with corporate capital on a scale - both in size and complexity - heretofore unimaginable. Heyworth, a community that owes its existence to the Illinois Central, is named for Sir Lawrence Heyworth, one of the road's famous stockholders from Great Britain.

As one would expect, much fanfare greeted the arrival of the first Illinois Central locomotive into Bloomington. Monday, May 23, marked the start of regular express, freight and passenger service on the line between Bloomington and LaSalle. "The throbbings of the great hearts of the commercial world will henceforth send their pulsations into our midst!" enthused The Intelligencer. "None of us are prepared for the changes which are soon to be affected by this great triumph."

Though the IC ran north to LaSalle (the southbound connection to Clinton would not be completed until March 14, 1854), it greatly facilitated travel between the west's two great commercial centers, St. Louis and Chicago.

From St. Louis, one could board a Chicago & Mississippi Railroad steamer (this was before railroad bridges spanned the mighty Mississippi) to Alton and then take a C&M train to Springfield. In the spring of 1853, the C&M north of the state capital was still under construction, so one had to travel by stage - mile by jostling, spleen-splitting mile - to Bloomington. From there, one could board an Illinois Central train to LaSalle, and thence east to Chicago on the Chicago & Rock Island Railroad. Though such a journey comes across today as a daunting, grueling endeavor, for the mid-19th century traveler, it was nothing short of a miracle.

Five months later, in October 1853, the Chicago & Mississippi (today the line used by Union Pacific and Amtrak) reached Bloomington, having come north from Springfield. The stretch from Bloomington to Joliet, though, would not be opened until the following year.

Even so, with the C&M's Springfield-to-Bloomington link complete, passengers could travel entirely by rail all the way from Alton on the east bank of the Mississippi River to Chicago and onward to New York. If all went well (an admittedly precarious assumption given the vagaries of train travel in the antebellum period), such a trip could be accomplished in 50 hours. Several decades earlier, that same journey would often take weeks.

"What a mighty achievement!" marveled The Intelligencer. "How striking the commentary on the age we live in! In the language of one commenting on the past and speculating on the future, we may well exclaim - 'What's next?' "