

1949 INCIDENT RECALLED

Story of Animal on Loose Turned Into 'Tiger (D)rag'

BY ABE ALTROWITZ
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LAKE CALHOUN — Diary of a weekend that, for me, included:

A St. Paul visit with Ida Bleher Davis, 1965 Duluth Woman of The Year who authored "Fun With Yiddish," a little volume offering words, phrases and recipes.

A flock of Crappies on a Willmar, Minn., visit with Morris Chargo, the man who on Feb. 9, 1949, precipitated a hectic to-do with a "tiger-on-the-loose" version of the Orson Welles 1938 "Men From Mars" broadcast.

Mrs. Davis, at the home of Mrs. Isabel Birnberg Bernstein — who avowed she didn't approve of the newspaper fraternity, because "they print some things that should never be published" — said the thousand copies of "Fun With Yiddish" were just about exhausted. She is toying with the idea of asking her printer (Arrowhead of Duluth-Superior) to do a second thousand.

But on the Yiddish word for gravy, which I've been trying to get, she continued to shake her head. She didn't know, nor has anyone else given me the answer.

Willmar Home

The visit with Chargo was at the Willmar home of his son and daughter-in-law, Edward and Roberta Chargo.

Back in 1949 Chargo, owner of the Willmar Produce & Steel Co., was paying Radio Station KWLM a half-hour on radio time each week to advertise his business. He served as his own program organizer and announcer.

He "had to have fun" on the program, he said, and among things he did was to give recognition to birthdays, wedding anniversaries, outstanding achievements, etc., etc. He thought such things would be good for his business.

One day on his broadcast he wanted to say something nice about a friend who was in the hospital with pneumonia. He identified the friend as Emil Grams, then special agent for the Great Northern Railway in Willmar, now the road's special agent in Havre, Mont.

'Real Good'

Chargo described Grams as about 7 feet tall, "a mountain of a man," and then added, "But how could I tell listeners that this big man

was in the hospital with a well, a cold."

"Well," Chargo said, "I decided to make it real good. I told the listeners Grams was in the hospital with a broken leg and broken ribs and a lot of lacerations." And how come the fractures and lacerations?

"I told the listeners something had happened to a train carrying circus animals, and some tigers had gotten loose. I told them my friend killed two of them but the third got away—after mauling him."

(He was quoted at the time as saying he offended the tiger-on-the-loose story because he wanted to find out whether anybody listened to his program.)

What happened, after that story, verged on a nightmare, Chargo recalled. Men started moving into Willmar with rifles and shotguns for a life-and-death safari. Gatherings broke up, and folks raced for home. Etc., etc., etc.

The tiger - on - the - loose broadcast brought reaction throughout the nation, Chargo said, with a great many barbs included. At one time, he said, Kate Smith, of vocal and radio fame, "took after me" on one of her broadcasts out of Chicago.

"That really was something," he said in recalling the episode. "That night in Willmar it was 22 below zero. Imagine circus animals on the loose in 22-below-zero weather!"

'Wedding'

In less hectic vein was his "radio wedding."

One day a young woman

from a farm home near New London, Minn., came in to ask where she could buy a phonograph. She wanted it so that the wedding march could be played at her wedding, to be held at the farm home.

There was no phonograph to be had.

But Chargo, with his touch if initiative, told her that if the wedding march would start at a precise time — which he gave her then and there — she could rest assured there would be wedding march music at her wedding. And wedding march music there was.

"I don't know a darn thing about music," he said. "But on my program I always had a band of seven I called the Royal Scandinavians. Oh yes, I was the conductor of the orchestra. I just waved my arms for rhythm. And at the very start of the program that night the Royal Scandinavians played the wedding march. And then one of our people sang 'I Love You Truly.'"

Every now and then he still hears about the tiger from somebody, and not always in complimentary fashion.

Oh yes, that flock of crappies — Chargo caught them at Lake Andrew and gave them to me with the comment that they'd probably taste better than any I'd catch at Lake Calhoun. I doubt that, and one day soon we're going to prepare them and find out.

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