

SETTING

TIME AND PLACE

Time:

Christmas Eve, 1947.

Place:

Studio A at WBAL Radio,
and various locations in
the Bedford Falls
of our imagination.





PHILIP VAN DOREN STERN

Author and Historian

Philip Van Doren Stern was the author of *The Greatest Gift*, a barely remembered, almost-never-published short story initially inspired by a dream. This story is the basis for Frank Capra's film *It's a Wonderful Life*.

Born in a small Pennsylvania town in 1900, Stern attended Rutgers and lived most of his life in New York City. He became one of the country's foremost scholars of the Civil War, publishing fiction and nonfiction accounts of that era. Stern also wrote and edited horror and science fiction, including *Tales of Horror and the Supernatural*, *The Midnight Reader*, and an Edgar Allen Poe biography. During World War II, he served as general manager of a nonprofit that distributed paperback books to active soldiers.

Originally unable to publish *The Greatest Gift*, Stern sent 200 copies of the 21-page story to his friends as Christmas gifts in 1943.



FRANK CAPRA

Director, Producer, Author


Courtesy of Wesleyan University

Frank Capra's work has become so well-known and respected that it is today used as a yardstick by which critics and the public measure a certain type of purely American film comedy.

Capra was born in Bisacchino, Sicily, on May 18, 1897, and immigrated to the United States when he was five. He earned an engineering degree at the California Institute of Technology in 1918 and then began a long and successful film career. After working for Mack Sennett as gag writer and director, he went to work at Columbia Pictures, and became instrumental in lifting the studio out of the "Poverty Row" category.

Capra's films brought him two Oscars for Best Picture and three for Best Director: *It Happened One Night* (1934), *Mr. Deeds Goes to Town* (1936), and *You Can't Take It With You* (1938). He also directed such landmark movies as *Mr. Smith Goes to Washington* (1939), *Meet John Doe* (1941), and the ever-popular *It's a Wonderful Life* (1946).

During World War II, Capra became a colonel in the Army Signal Corps, directing the Award-winning *Why We Fight* series. He retired from filmmaking in 1966, after which he published his autobiography, *The Name Above the Title*, in 1971. Throughout the 1970s, Capra was much in demand as a lecturer and guest at film festivals and other events, and performed service for the US government. He retired from public life in the 1980s following a series of debilitating strokes.

Capra was president of the Academy of Motion Picture Arts and Sciences, president of the Screen Directors Guild, and the recipient of the Distinguished Service Medal, the Order of the British Empire, the White House National Medal of the Arts, the 10th Annual American Film Institute Life Achievement Award, and many other honors. 



Once-upon-a

By Gavin Witt, Production Dramaturg

IT TAKES A MIRACLE TO SAVE GEORGE BAILEY

and restore his sense of hope; it arguably took no less of a miracle for his story to make its way into the world. While today Frank Capra's film version of *It's a Wonderful Life* might play in a reliable annual routine on countless screens, and in countless fond memories, the journey from original idea to cherished icon was one filled with bumps and hurdles, near-misses and ultimate grace.

It started with a vision. Noted historian and Civil War buff Philip Van Doren Stern had been trying his hand at fiction, with little success. One February morning in 1938, he was shaving when a story came to him, fully formed and intact as no story ever had before or would after. His problem, he recalls, was learning how to write what he already knew.

Clear to Stern was the tale of a small-town husband and father, George Pratt, discouraged and alone, who finds himself standing on a bridge at Christmas contemplating the dark waters below. To him appears a mysterious stranger, who grants George's wish that he'd never been born. Masquerading as a salesman, George traverses his hometown to find himself truly absent from history and from the lives of his friends and loved ones.

Stern tried several drafts, unhappy each time with the results. Finally, in 1943 (exactly 100 years after Dickens published *A Christmas Carol*, for whatever you want to make of that), he had his agent send it around. But not one magazine or one publisher would print the story, now titled "The Greatest Gift."

So Stern—himself of mixed faith traditions—had the story printed up at his own cost and distributed 200 copies as his annual holiday card (including enlisting his young daughter to pass it around). Through an unlikely chain of circumstances, the story came into the hands of an executive at RKO film studios. Stern had all but given up on his creation when, to his astonishment, he got a call from Western Union: RKO had bought the movie rights, hoping to use it as a vehicle for Cary Grant.

Some of Hollywood's leading writers, including Dalton Trumbo and Clifford Odets, took a stab at crafting a screenplay, with little success. Grant moved on, the project languished, and RKO finally dumped it—selling the rights to Frank Capra in 1944 and throwing in the three existing screenplay drafts for free.



George Bailey and Clarence working on a miracle.



Donna Reed was a 4H Club alumna from small-town Iowa and found herself at home in the story; in fact, she later won a bet with Lionel Barrymore (Mr. Potter) by demonstrating her prowess at milking a cow.



Jimmy Stewart had spent the war valiantly piloting bomber missions, rising to the rank of Colonel.

Wonderful

Capra, an Italian immigrant who had thrived as a director in pre-War Hollywood, fell in love with the story and knew just how to tell it. However, he was only just back from World War II, and anxious that his years away had set him back professionally. As further risk, he'd just launched his own new production company, Liberty Films, which had precisely zero track record and about as much clout. So in 1945, he reached out to a friend and fellow veteran.

Jimmy Stewart had spent the war valiantly piloting bomber missions, rising to the rank of Colonel—but was certain that his acting career had not survived the war with him. He was sure he'd never work in film again. But he and Capra had worked together before, and had a strong affinity. Stewart was from a small town in Pennsylvania, and after a stint in the family hardware business had gone on to Princeton to study architecture before Hollywood nabbed him; he felt the call of the material and signed on. Together, he and Capra hoped to secure another favorite collaborator, Jean Arthur, for their leading lady. When she proved unavailable, the part went to Donna Reed. A 4H Club alumna from small-town Iowa, Reed found herself at home in the story; in fact, she later won a bet with Lionel Barrymore (Mr. Potter) by demonstrating her prowess at milking a cow. The central trio was set.

There remained the problem of a shooting script, however, and more hard work and near failures followed before a working screenplay emerged—under the steady guidance of Capra's vision. He confidently had an enormous location set constructed, complete with 80 buildings over nearly four city blocks to create a veritable Bedford Falls. Fully grown trees were planted; animals and livestock were turned loose; and the production department even invented a revolutionary new form of fake snow to transform a California heatwave into a Currier and Ives winter spectacle.

Shooting went well, and everyone involved reported a magical, family atmosphere on set. All had high hopes for the endeavor. Both Capra and Stewart always spoke about it as the favorite among all their many films. When the finished picture was released in 1946, however, it garnered mixed reviews. It lost money at the box office, and fairly quickly sank into obscurity. It even managed to get some negative attention from the FBI, which passed on a report alleging seditious, even Communist, messages in the movie.

The miracles and movie magic weren't done, though. Through yet another set of unlikely coincidences, the movie passed out of

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copyright protection in the 1970s and suddenly became a staple of television re-runs. A new generation discovered its many charms and its potent message of hope, redemption, and community. As if at a stroke, the movie became one of the most beloved, and often-viewed, of its own or any era.

Capra lived long enough to see his film “redeemed” from relative obscurity and firmly ensconced in American culture as a beloved classic. Whether this is your first encounter with George Bailey and the denizens of Bedford Falls, or your 1000th, they are ready to work their magic once again. ❄️



Everyone involved reported a magical, family atmosphere on set.



The Golden Age of Radio Drama



The Golden Age of Radio

began with the explosion of broadcasting in the early 1920s and waned as television took over in the 1950s. In its heyday, some 80% of Americans may have been regular listeners. Entire families gathered at regularly scheduled times, often interrupting any other activity, to listen to cherished programs. There were soap operas like *The Guiding Light*, and a myriad of exotic mystery serials like *The Adventures of Ellery Queen* or *The Shadow*. There were situation comedies like *Fibber McGee and Molly*, *Ozzie and Harriet*, or *Father Knows Best*; and numberless variety shows of all sorts.

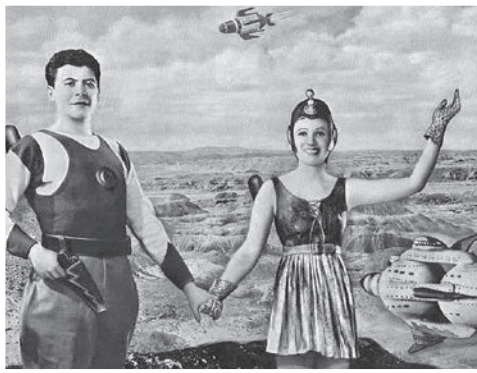
Through the depths of the Depression, with millions out of work and out of hope, people sought consolation and found renewed strength listening to President Roosevelt and his Fireside Chats. When war clouds gathered and burst, Edward R. Murrow kept

them abreast with his broadcasts from the front lines. When the airship Hindenburg burst into flames, the nation listened breathless to the disaster on radio. When Kentucky caver Floyd Collins was trapped underground, or aviator Charles Lindbergh first bravely crossed the Atlantic, the country followed along over radio. The likes of folksy humorist Will Rogers, wry wisecracker Jack Benny, dulcet crooner Bing Crosby—and along with them, signature sponsors from hair tonics to soap suds—all claimed a treasured place in homes across America via the radio waves.

Wireless transmission into private homes only emerged around 1920. Shortly after, in 1922, the first dramatic radio series was broadcast over WGY in Schenectady, New York, producing a series of play adaptations. In 1936, the popular Lux Radio Theatre moved from New York to Hollywood, to

broadcast films adapted into hour-long radio scripts. For more than 20 years, it was the most successful dramatic anthology on the air, featuring popular stars in hit movies. But the single best-known episode of radio drama must remain the Orson Welles-directed adaptation of H.G. Wells' *The War of the Worlds* from 1938—which many listeners believed to be actual reports of an invasion from Mars, so established was radio's credibility. 🌿





Watch WITH YOUR EARS

From adventure serials to soap operas, from Buck Rogers' whizzing spacecraft to Jack Benny's wheezing jalopy, there would have been no radio theater without two crucial components. First essential was the hungry imagination of the listener. Second essential, to fire that imagination and bring to life the worlds and the action, was the sound effects operator.

Known as Foley work on film, where it is almost always created in post-production, the sound effects on radio were made by operators who had to work live, fast, and on the spot. Despite best intentions, they didn't always get the script in advance, and nothing is ever more predictable than the unpredictable.

A combination of musician, technician, actor, contortionist, basement tinkerer, and sound wizard, the alchemists of audio had

to use all their know-how and considerable inventiveness to create believable effects and convincing atmosphere, unobtrusively in a small space with some of the oddest assortment of tools. Obviously, there were well-established stand-bys to draw on, like thundersheets and wind machines, or crash boxes and starter's pistols. There were door knockers and doorbells to fall back on. But they also devised new routines, like squeezing boxes of baking soda for the sound of walking in snow. And nearly every script would stretch their capacity and their ingenuity in unexpected ways.

Every sound you hear, they would make: every footstep, door slam, car engine, bird twitter, train whistle, gun shot fired or whiskey shot poured. Also, every place you see, every action you can imagine, they help bring to

life in your imagination: every distant vista, or diner counter; every cozy fireplace or faraway seaport; every snowstorm or creaky staircase. Our hero is trapped in a fusillade of bullets? Our happy couple snuggles on the settee? A mysterious figure lurks in the shadows, or creeps down rains-slick streets? That's the sound effects operator you have to thank for that image.

Joe Landry's adaptation of *It's a Wonderful Life* suitably incorporates, and relies on, this classic element. To join the fun, check out the "Foley" station in the lobby, footage on the Media Wall, and the digital dramaturgy at centerstage.org/wonderful. 