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GROSSE POINTE WOODS
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Child actress from 'The Lone Ranger' to participate in upcoming talk

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GROSSE POINTE WOODS — They might not have recognized her in person, but to the countless young listeners who tuned into radio broadcasts of "The Lone Ranger" from the mid 1930s through the 1940s, Shirley Ann Russell was a bona fide star.

Russell — now Shirley Maylock — played the male and female child roles on national broadcasts of "The Lone Ranger" and other dramas broadcast from WXYZ studios in Detroit from the ages of 7-16. Since the child in these shows was often in need of rescue, she remembers doing "a lot of whimpering" more than a lot of dialogue. Still, in an era before television, these broadcasts captured the attention of a nation eager to escape a difficult time marked by economic collapse and war, and Maylock played a pivotal part in these broadcasts.

Larry Zdeb of Troy, an artist and radio historian and collector, will share stories, images and collectibles from "The Lone Ranger" run in Detroit from 1933-1954 during a free presentation at 7:30 p.m. Nov. 7 at the Woods Branch of the Grosse Pointe Public Library. Maylock will be on hand to answer questions from attendees.

Many metro Detroiters don't realize "The Lone Ranger" was broadcast from the Motor City, Zdeb said. Brace Beemer, one of the two actors who played the title role, is buried at White Chapel Cemetery in Troy, and Zdeb — who lives nearby — has taken it upon himself to care for and maintain the gravesite. Beemer was so celebrated, Zdeb said, the actor was invited to dinner at the White House by President Franklin Delano Roosevelt.

"The entire country would be glued to these broadcasts," said Diana Howbert, a reference



Photo by K. Michelle Moran
Shirley Maylock — born Shirley Ann Russell — was a child actress who played all of the children's roles on the radio broadcast of "The Lone Ranger" in Detroit from 1935-1945.

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librarian in the AV Department for the Grosse Pointe Public Library. “Back in the day, these radio dramas really put WXYZ and Detroit on the map.”

Grosse Pointe City actor, radio personality and radio historian Marty Bufalini — who wrote an original radio play script for the classic movie, “It’s a Wonderful Life” — has staged live radio plays in recent years, introducing new audiences to a form of entertainment enjoyed by a previous generation. He rescued the only remaining sound effects from the old WXYZ radio studios — a door and a buzzer box that replicates the sound of a phone, doorbell and buzzer — and has used them in his productions.

Bufalini said “The Lone Ranger” had “all the right elements” to keep audiences hooked, including an iconic catchphrase — “Who was that masked man?” — and famous tricks and gimmicks, such as silver bullets.

WXYZ was also home to broadcasts of other popular radio shows, including “The Green Hornet” and “Sergeant Preston of the Yukon.” After securing permission from building officials, Zdeb took Maylock to the shuttered WXYZ radio studios in the Maccabees Building in Detroit last August.

“One of the reasons I’m speaking is to try to get this (designated) as a Michigan Historic Site,” he said of the studios, which have fallen into disrepair, although they still bear the director’s booth, from which the actors and sound effects personnel would have gotten their cues. At 64, Zdeb grew up with television, but he came to love the old radio shows he periodically heard rebroadcast on the radio; technology eventually enabled the station to record them, and Zdeb shared a snippet on CD with Maylock, letting the actress hear herself as a child for the first time.

“That was amazing,” Maylock said.

Maylock was the youngest in the Russell family, which included two sisters and a brother. Her mother was a homemaker and her father worked for an auto dealership downtown.

“And we never owned a car — go figure,” she said with a grin.

Maylock’s acting career began by chance. One of her sisters took a 5-year-old Maylock downtown in response to a free tap lessons offer, and while there, Maylock said they were approached by someone who invited the little girl to be on a local radio show. It was during the Great Depression, and child entertainers like Mickey Rooney, Shirley Temple and the “Our Gang” performers were all the rage with audiences.

“I think it made people happy during those hard times,” Maylock says now.

Her first radio gig was “Kiddie’s Karnival,” which she said was broadcast from the Bonstelle Theatre. Shortly thereafter, Maylock was offered a spot on “The Children’s Theatre of the Air,” a variety show with young performers that was broadcast in front of a live studio audience from noon-1 p.m. Sundays on the stage of the Broadway Capitol Theatre — now the Detroit Opera House. Maylock’s father took her to the theater for the Sunday performances so that her mother could attend church services.

“When most kids were going to Sunday school, I was putting on greasepaint,” Maylock said.

Rehearsals for “Kiddie’s Karnival” took place at the Maccabees Building, and one day, Maylock said a WXYZ director took the then-7-year-old into another studio to read a commercial. She didn’t realize it then, but that commercial was her audition for the station.

“It evidently went well, because from that point forward, every time a child was needed for a radio program or commercial, I was it,” Maylock said.

When her peers were going home from school, Maylock was heading to the studio, accompanied by her mother. She remembers taking the East Warren bus and Woodward streetcar to get to the Maccabees Building. The building is now owned by Wayne State University, and the studios — on the vacant 15th floor — are empty and closed to the public, said Zdeb. “The Lone Ranger” — which aired Mondays, Wednesdays and Fridays

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— was broadcast live from 7:30-8 p.m. for the East Coast, and the cast performed it all over again for West Coast audiences at 10:30 p.m. EST, Maylock said.

“There was no taping, no recording at that time,” she said.

So on the days when they needed a young actor, Maylock could expect to be at the studio from roughly 3-11 p.m.

The microphones were suspended from the ceiling and weren’t adjustable, so Maylock remembers standing on a green box to reach one. She was fascinated with the sound effects crewmembers, whose many tricks included replicating the clop of horse hooves with gravel and a plunger.

She earned \$10 per show — \$34 when the cast joined the American Federation of Radio Artists.

Maylock took acting lessons from John Todd, the Shakespearian actor who played Tonto. She became close with the cast.

“It was great,” Maylock said. “They were like my family. I was little and cute, and they fussed over me.”

But she didn’t want anyone else to make a fuss over her.

“I think the difficult part for me was not wanting to be pointed out,” said Maylock of her unusual after school activities. “(Acting) was just what I did, and I loved it.”

By the time she reached age 16, Maylock had matured beyond child roles. She said her last commercial was for Cheerios. A number of people encouraged her to go into summer stock, but Maylock ended her acting career for a family, getting married to her high school sweetheart when she was 19.

“It was a time when you got married and had babies, so I conformed,” she said.

She and her husband had three children — a daughter and two sons. Maylock began fulfilling her lifelong dream of attending college when she went to Macomb Community College for two years in her 40s. After 30 years of marriage, she and her husband divorced. Inspired by the women’s movement, Maylock went on to earn a bachelor’s degree in psychology from the University of Michigan-Dearborn at age 63, after which she started her own business writing personal biographies for people to preserve their family histories. For the last 11 years, she’s worked in the Grosse Pointe Public Library’s AV Department. At 84, she has eight grandchildren and three great-grandchildren, but the Harrison Township resident looks, and acts, decades younger. She has a Facebook account and a smartphone, and she texts her grandchildren regularly, to their delight — and to the shock of their young peers.

“I just don’t think we should let anything pass (us) by,” she said of her penchant for embracing the latest technology.

Since meeting Zdeb about a year ago, Maylock has done several presentations with him. She’s now working on her autobiography, as well, and considering a return to acting. Maylock has been astonished by the reception she’s gotten from fans of the old radio shows.

“I was treated like a rock star,” she said of one presentation, with a laugh. “People were actually asking for my autograph. It’s been great fun.”

The Woods Branch of the Grosse Pointe Public Library is located next to Parcels Middle School at Mack and Vernier, at 20680 Mack. Although this program is free, reservations are needed because seating is limited. For reservations or more information, call (313) 343-2074, ext. 222, or visit www.gp.lib.mi.us.

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'It was amazing'