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"MR. DIXIE"

By WILLIAM A. EMERSON, JR.

After 22 years on a Charlotte station, Grady Cole says he's still not a professional radio man. But he snows under all rivals, and his droll news and weather reports bring him \$100,000 a year.



A BIG sedan hurtling through the North Carolina countryside was finally overtaken by a grim-faced motorcycle cop. As soon as he got one foot on the ground, the officer began writing the ticket.

"Hiya, pal," the driver said easily, "I'm Jack Dempsey."

"Uh-huh," the cop said, and kept on writing.

"My friend here and I were hurrying to get over to Asheville."

"Uh-huh, and what's your name, bub?" the motorcycle cop asked Jack Dempsey's companion, a hulking young man with powerful features. "I'm Grady Cole," the latter replied.

"Grady Cole!" The cop stopped writing. "You the fellow I hear on the radio?"

"Reckon I am," Grady said.

"Man, my mother loves you better than she loves me. Wonder if you'd read her name out over the air?"

The famous boxer and his obscure companion were on their way in a few minutes. This time there was an escort clearing the road, siren wailing.

Grady Cole was just easing into Southern radio when this happened back in the thirties. Now, as farm editor, announcer, disk jockey, weather forecaster, news commentator and top entertainer for radio station WBT, a 50,000 watt CBS affiliate in Charlotte, North Carolina, Grady is generally recognized in the Carolinas by sight or by sound. He'd be downright disheartened if a formal introduction were necessary.

Grady is on the air for WBT more than four hours a day from Monday through Saturday, and he has two Sunday programs. He has been on this same station for 22 years, or, as he puts it, "since receiving sets were a cat's whisker and a crystal." Along with Arthur Godfrey, Grady pioneered in morning radio. Cole of the Carolinas has been favored with offers to come to the big time, too, but he always says, "No, thank you, I'll just stay here and plow."

The big, country-looking fellow of forty-six, with puffy temples, graying hair, and a nervous habit of alternately slapping his stomach and tapping the brim of his hat, has done all right on the farm. Grady Cole's drawling, rural voice has won him the top announcer's salary in Southeastern radio, about \$100,000 a year. Dawdling along, it has been credited by at least one governor of each Carolina as the deciding factor in his election; it has located lost hound-dogs and kidnapped children; it has endlessly dealt out homey philosophy, blistering political observations and information on manure; it has thumped the Bible and urged alert citizenship; and it has never come within a country mile of the professional standard for radio broadcasters.

Grady Cole's voice even has secret listeners. Some sophisticated cityfolk would rather die than admit they listen to Grady. But, most of them do. According to a Pulse Report on Charlotte Listenership, Cole Farm News and Weather at 12:15 P.M. has more listeners than two networks, one independent station and the 15 out-of-town stations that put clear signals into Charlotte, combined. The program is strictly a load of hay for the counties, but it has 71 per cent of the city audience, more than six times the audience of its nearest competitor.

"Just as well get used to me as keep running to turn me off," Grady tells his audience. "We'll get used to each other." His line has always been, "People who like me wouldn't like good programs. They can stand it because they've been brought up on it, and it hasn't hurt them any."

At 5:30 A.M., Grady Cole signs WBT on the air. Face covered with stubble, he loosens his tie and his belt, sticks a few notes in his hat, slumps down in his swivel chair and starts talking. After he has been in front of the microphone for a few minutes, his face gets that restful look. Soon he is as relaxed as a possum in the sunshine.

He may begin the morning with, "Now every man after his own rat killing," or, "Don't criticize a man's gait unless you've walked in his shoes," and then he's off into a commercial, a record, a tale about his uncle or a dig at administration spending. During the morning platter program, Grady drinks cup after cup of coffee from a cracked, run-down-looking cup without a handle. It is never hot enough to suit him.

He'll holler into the control room, "If they got the same current in Raleigh that heated that last cup, they'd better call off the electrocution this week end. It'll just sear him. Come to think of it," he'll add, "the politicians got a gas chamber there. But if rope cost a million dollars a yard, I'll guarantee you they'd have hanging back."

Grady belongs to no political party, and he has offered a hundred dollars over the air to anybody who can tell him the difference between a Republican and a Democrat. He sounds off on all political issues—sometimes to the discomfort of station, sponsors and listeners.

"Now, I'll say we are all grateful to Mr. Truman," he said not long ago, "but somebody is getting it high up on the hog. Let us get a little bit of it."

"I used to think it was important who was President, but it makes no difference. That's been proved."

Then, as if he could feel a restlessness among his listeners, he'll say soothingly, "If you have a falling out with me, you'll get over it, because I don't love parties, I love people."

Grady Cole's susceptibility to people almost amounts to a disease. It takes him an hour to walk a city block. On a routine trip to the bank, Grady will talk crops with half a dozen farmers, politics with three or four policemen and "the time of day" with anybody who is out of doors.

"Never had any trouble with people," Grady Cole says; "was in Harlan, Kentucky, once on Election Day. Got along fine."

People come to the station in droves to seek Grady out. A haggard farmer turned up just outside the open door of the broadcasting studio the other morning. He had come to tell Grady that his boys "had runned away," and to urge him to put a description on the air. He did. The leader of a group of singers was in Grady's office at 6:00 A.M. trying to persuade Grady to eat a coon sandwich that he had prepared especially for his breakfast. Grady turned it down flat.

Grady's attractive brunette wife, Helen, and his three children, Grady, Jr., twenty-five, Beverly, twenty-three, and Edward, thirteen, come to the station to visit him too. "See them 'bout as much as I would if they was collecting my insurance," he says sourly. And, actually, the four hours' sleep a night that his schedule allows are also the four hours that he is supposed to have with his family. When Grady is not broadcasting, he is recording, furiously writing scripts or traveling to some speaking engagement in the Carolinas.

"Work from can't see to can't see," he says. "Man with ordinary intelligence could earn a living in eight hours."

One real clump of gravel in Grady Cole's shoe is inflation. He bet a friend \$10 that he could borrow money from a beggar. He did it.

"I just told him I was caught short. That I'd appreciate it if he could let me have a dollar for an hour or so."

"I'm not going to be on this stand all day," the beggar said. "Get back as soon as you can."

Grady passed the story on to his radio audience with great relish.

"When you can borrow money from a beggar, man, it's cheap," he told them. "He didn't give me change either. It was quiet, green stuff. Folding money. It's cheaper to eat money now'days. We chewed some up the other day. It's no good.

"A fellow can't afford to work for what he's worth any more. Other things are up so high. I went to town not long ago and didn't buy a thing—it cost me three dollars."

Grady is a Bible-belter, and he never fails to get in a blow for the church. A tirade against inflation will probably end with the admonition that, "Everything in the world has gone up except the money in the collection plate at church. On Sunday we eke out that quarter and drop it heavy."

Commercials—Country Style

When Grady gets around to the commercials, and some product has to have its head patted every few seconds, it's pure Grady Cole. He plays them by ear, or "shoots from the hip," as he calls it. "Now what would countryfolks like me do with some fancy business writ up by a big muckety-muck in New York?" he asks.

Grady takes the listener's arm, and talks to him like one farmer telling another what helped his sick mule.

When he is plugging what we will call Old Auntie's Hot Roll Mix, he'll say, "Now if they say they don't have it, you're in the wrong place. You aren't in a grocery store. You are in a hardware store. Go out and find a grocery store."

In touting his sponsor's brand of cigarettes, he'll tell the farmers, "The average fellow who talks' about tobacco over the radio wouldn't know a tobacco leaf from a collard green. I've raised tobacco. I've bought tobacco. I've sold tobacco. I'll tell you the honest truth . . ."

And about his TV set: "Lady, even if your husband does sell another make, if he really loves you, he'll get you this one."

When the subject of washing machines came up in a radio interview, Grady plugged his manufacturer. "I wouldn't buy one to save my life," the interviewee said stubbornly.

"Buy one to save your wife," Grady rejoined.

Some years ago, Grady was pushing an item that turned sour. It didn't live up to the promises he had made, and the station got kicks about it. Grady realized that he had made a mistake. He went on the air and took full responsibility.

"I was wrong," he said. "Now, this thing won't do what I told you it would, and I'm sorry. I don't want you to buy any more of it. If you've got any on hand that you don't like, I'll refund your money personally. And I promise you," he wound up, "I'll never advertise it again, and I'll never tell you about anything else that I'm not sure of."

Grady did refund hundreds of dollars out of his own pocket, and confidence in him was increased tenfold.

Grady has been advertising a national brand of rice for about 14 years. A few years ago, somebody asked a top executive of a competitive company if Grady Cole's work had any effect on their sales.

"Any effect!" he echoed with real feeling. "The only open market for our product in the Carolinas is one valley where WBT doesn't reach. We can plot the station's reception by our sales."

A recent mail brought in a letter from West Virginia with a crumpled-up \$5 bill. It was addressed to WBT in care of Grady Cole.

"Dear sir," the letter spelled out. "Grady Cole was talking 'bout something the other day. I forget what it was, but it sounded good. Will you please send me some of it?"

Although Grady's critics say he needn't bother, he keeps reminding his listening audience that he was born in the country, and that the only reason he doesn't go back is that it takes too much brains and work to earn a living on the farm.

"I was born in Montgomery County, North Carolina, in 1906," Grady says. "The furthestest back in the country anybody could be born. You could leave my house going in any direction and get closer to civilization. Now, there was some people living over back of us, but nobody had ever seen them. The land was so pore the only thing you could raise was a family.

"Candor was the nearest town to my home. People ask me which side of the road it was on. Hell—there was just one side to that road. You'd been in a mess if you'd met anybody.

"I went to Candor for the first time when I was about four years old. A man gave me a peppermint horseshoe. I thought it was Christmas."

Grady Cole's father was an excavator, and it was said in his home county that "his eye was as true as an instrument." When digging was slack, he did a little road building, and between the fortunes of the two of them, the family moved to Charlotte when Grady was in his teens.

Grady attended Baird's School in Charlotte, a preparatory school run by old Major Baird. Grady remembers himself as a totally unregimented pupil, and recalls two specific occasions when the great, rawboned major disciplined him by knocking him cold with a right to the jaw.

The Major Kayoed 'Em Quick

"The major was a wonderful person, and the most powerful human being I have seen in my life," Grady says. "Sometimes he would knock you out without rising from his desk."

In 1924, Grady became infatuated with the idea of making big money. He struck out for New York City. His brash determination got him the position of 27th assistant clerk in a coupon-redemption center at a salary of \$35 a week. And not one to stand behind the door when there was excitement in the air, Grady moved into a hotel on Times Square to be in the center of things. Within a few days, a gambler was killed in an adjoining room, and he felt that his desire had been gratified.

"In that neighborhood, they would knock you in the head for 50 cents," Grady says. "I don't know what they charge now. But, after a year, I decided you could talk like most New Yorkers by stuffing your mouth full of hot French fried potatoes, and I had heard enough of it."

After his return to Charlotte, Grady worked for the Associated Press for several years, and then he took to the road again. He became advance press agent for a patent medicine, Digestomint, and he toured the South, the East and the West.

"In every town I'd hire the police chief's boy and the mayor's boy to put out the circulars. Didn't cost any more," Grady says, "and I never had a failure."

A Scatterbrained Reporter

In 1929, Grady Cole went to work for the Charlotte News as a reporter. Brodie Griffith, managing editor then and executive editor now, remembers him well.

Brodie and Grady have been friends ever since.

"Grady was a harum-scarum, scatterbrained youngster," Brodie says. "Sometimes he would forget to come to work. But, he was witty and always in a good humor."

During those days, the News and WBT had a reciprocal agreement whereby the paper gave a daily five-minute newscast over the station, and the station plugged the News. Grady insisted to Brodie Griffith that the news was being flubbed, and that he could put it over. Brodie was glad to let him try.

"Grady had the greatest desire I've ever seen in anybody to get before a mike," Brodie says. "He stuttered and stammered over the air, but he had an instantaneous effect on the audience. His voice had a special timbre."

Some years later, Brodie and the publisher of the News went out into the county for a meeting. Their car had a Charlotte sticker, and, as frequently happens, they were asked if they knew Grady Cole.

"We said we sure did," Brodie recalls with quiet humor, "and those farmers exhibited an air of disbelief that such ordinary-looking mortals would even know Grady."

Station WBT offered Grady a staff job in 1930, and he accepted. Just three years later, there was a change in station managers, and Grady Cole announced to the radio audience that he was giving the news for the last time. After the broadcast, he walked out of the studio and was gone for three days.

"All hell broke loose," the station says.

"Enough protest mail to fill a piano box came in the second day." Some whole towns were up in arms. High Point, North Carolina, sent in petitions with more than 7,000 signatures urging Grady to go on with the news.

The new management arranged for Grady to continue with the program. Today, Grady, known to many as "Mr. Dixie," has two CBS network shows of his own, and half a dozen local programs in addition to the news.

Both network shows are on the Southern leg of CBS, which covers not only the Southeast, but Texas, Oklahoma, Louisiana and other states, with about 45 stations hooked in. He is on 15 minutes a day five days a week beginning at 4:00 P.M.

The best in all of this is "plain old Grady" talking from as far back in the country "as there is."

Little stories and fables come out in a rambling, helter-skelter fashion, and, sometimes, suddenly produce a point as sharp as a pig sticker.

Political Fable of Uncle Mo

"Now politics is like the story of Uncle Mo," Grady will say. "You know, he was the old Negro man, much beloved, and the best whip cracker in five counties.

He could snap a feather out of a chicken's back without harming that bird.

"Well, Uncle Mo and a little boy were riding along in a wagon, and they come to a hornets' nest.

"Uncle Mo, let me see you knock a hornet off that nest,' the little boy said.

" Giddup, mule.'

"Come on, Uncle Mo, snap one of them hornets off.'

"Get on. mule.'

"When the wagon got down to the bend in the road, Uncle Mo turned his head, 'You little fool. When you hit one of them you've hit an organization.'

"Never, never, never let your desires get the best of your judgment," Grady warns his radio audience. But he will not take his own advice about staying off the toes of an organization.

Back before 1948, a political machine had been in control of North Carolina for years. The governorship was swapped back and forth from the eastern to the western part of -the state, and the governors were picked 12 to 14 years in advance. "Wasn't like tennis," Grady says, "because you could miss in tennis."

In 1948, Charley Johnson, state treasurer and the machine candidate, was running for governor against Kerr Scott, Commissioner of Agriculture. Johnson finished well ahead of Scott in the primary. Quite confident of the election, he ordered a new seven-passenger limousine for his personal use as governor.

Grady Cole took up the cudgel for Kerr Scott. "The time had come when the state had to have a man without obligations," Grady says.

Grady stumped the whole state for Scott at his own expense. If he saw a funeral, he would stop, buy the biggest wreath of flowers he could find, and say they were from the next governor of the state, Kerr Scott. "The only thing in the world that has kept Scott away is a terrible cold," he would add.

A More Evil Kind of Flood

Grady had won a Presidential plaque for raising \$44,000 for victims of a flood in Kentucky some years earlier, the largest amount raised by any individual on any single station in the country. "I remember how all of you gave during the Kentucky flood," he told his radio audience. "Well, this time it's not Kentucky, but it's North Carolina, and it's a different kind of flood. We are flooded with Johnson money. I want you to give again. Your votes and your contributions."

Scott was elected, and now is in the last year of his term.

"I took counties where I wasn't supposed to get a smell of a vote," Governor Scott told this writer. "Grady's support got the vote in the Piedmont region."

And as Grady himself admits, that's where the vote is.

Many politicians would go a good bit further in estimating Grady's contribution. It has been irreverently stated that he took Scott out of a cornfield and put him in the Governor's Mansion.

Grady is said to have as much if not more influence in South Carolina. Senator Olin D. Johnston, twice governor of South Carolina and now in his second term as senator, has spent the four most important election mornings of his life with Grady Cole. Senator Johnston has always done his final campaigning for South Carolina office in North Carolina over WBT as a guest of Grady's.

Grady knows that his power is in the people's trust, and he as shrewdly avoids pushing a bad candidate as he would a bad product. "Can't elect dog meat," he says, conclusively. "Got to have good people."

It has been said again and again that Grady is the one man out of politics who could be elected governor of either North or South Carolina. It is a purely hypothetical question. "I pay twice as much taxes as the governor draws salary," Grady says. His old friends are absolutely convinced that he would rather broadcast than be governor.

In making a professional estimate of Grady Cole, a competitor said, "Grady is not much of a radio personality, but he is a genius at public relations."

Objective bystanders, like Tom Robinson, publisher of the Charlotte News, say that Grady is the biggest celebrity in North or South Carolina. There is little question but that he is the most popular master of ceremonies or guest speaker in either state. He is also one of the most available. It has been said that if three Carolina farmers got together to dip a sheep, Grady would accept an invitation to speak to them.

He is the man they pick to open the new golf course at Mooresville, to speak at the Farmers Day Celebration in Mount Holly, to emcee Community Center Day in Mount Airy. And in South Carolina it is Cole who is guest speaker at the 10th reunion of the Littlejohn clan in Cherokee County; who masterminds the high-school amateur show in Clover; who has spoken before almost every club in Lancaster.

Lancaster, South Carolina, is almost home to Grady. Colonel Elliott Springs, president of Spring Mills, and "Mr. Textile," so far as the state is concerned, has Grady down every year at the direct behest of his 14,000 employees. The colonel says, "They could have anybody, and they always want Grady by an overwhelming majority." He emceed the annual Springmaid Beauty Contest along with John Reed King, who comes down from New York. The redoubtable colonel says that the Springmaids won't look at him when Grady's around.

Mayor Crawford Billings of Lancaster strikes a more devotional chord by characterizing Grady as "the Moses of Lancaster County."

However apt the metaphor, Grady Cole has frequently inspired mass movements of human beings. In 1948, he urged his radio audience to come to a farm program that the Charlotte News and the Soil Conservation Service were putting on. "I'll be there to greet you," he told them.

More than 80,000 people turned up. Some farmers came from as far away as Tennessee.

Probably the biggest crowd ever assembled in Alexander County, North Carolina, came down out of the Brushy Mountains into Taylorsville to hear Grady. "The Brushy Mountains is where they once made the finest corn whisky in the United States," Grady says, "and it's the land from which many a revenueur never returned." For many months, Grady was in and out like home folks.

He auctioned everything from whiteface bulls to crocheted bedspreads and pine kindling to help the people of Alexander County raise enough money to build their first hospital. Finally in 1949, this rural county, with a total population of about 15,000, had collected almost \$100,000. In appreciation for Grady's help, everybody went back to work and raised hundreds more to furnish a special room in the hospital which they dedicated to Grady Cole as "a personal tribute."

The taproot of Grady's strength is that he can deliver service as well as entertainment.

In 1946, Grady got hundreds of emergency messages from farm people in North Carolina. The state system of highways and rural post roads, long in decay, almost dissolved during a season of bad weather. Conditions were so bad that farmers were taking their dead out on tractors to be buried. They couldn't get crops to town, children to school or medical care to the farm.

Variety Gives Him an Award

Grady organized and headed a delegation to Governor Cherry and to the North Carolina Roads Commission. Within 30 days, \$100,000,000 had been appropriated for roads. Variety, a magazine of the entertainment world, acknowledged Grady's decisive handling of this situation with a special award for civic contribution.

Grady Cole and station WBT were given credit by the U.S. Department of Agriculture for putting crop insurance across in North Carolina. And, again, it was Grady who persuaded 25,000 North Carolina farmers to let the Army use their land for maneuvers during World War II.

Grady Cole's fortunes have always been closely allied with the fortunes of WBT. Grady and Charlotte's 50,000-watt station, which is owned by the Jefferson Standard Life Insurance Company and affiliated with CBS, have grown up together. They are a mutual admiration society.

"It's the poppa," Grady says. "It's the pork chop with the pants on."

There is very little question that either institution would sorely miss the other. Charles Crutchfield, general manager of WBT, and vice-president of the Jefferson Standard Broadcasting Company, lists Grady as one of the station's three major assets. The other two are a loyal audience and generous management by Jefferson Standard, under president Joseph M. Bryan.

WBT is the oldest licensed station in the South and proud of the distinction of being the first to broadcast the "rebel yell." Management takes pleasure in the fact that Charlotte, North Carolina, had a radio station before New York City. The broadcasting activity that became WBT actually announced its programs in 1920 by having a member of the organization run through the streets of Charlotte beseeching the people to tune in.

Manager Crutchfield, suave and executive in demeanor, seems at first to strike a sharp contrast with Grady, who maintains that "clothes fake the man," and puts his trust in one camel's-hair sport coat. But the two have fondness and respect for each other and are a formidable team.

Manager in Briarhopper Role

Crutchfield's own triumph as a performer in radio was in the rustic role of Charley Briarhopper, hillbilly entertainer extraordinary and star performer of the Briarhopper Boys. Crutchfield helped to establish a tradition by completely taking his ease in front of the microphone: he sat down to broadcast, and habitually stopped in the middle of a commercial to yawn audibly or ridicule the sponsor. He sustained this exuberant, snuff-dipping creation of a Briarhopper for more than a decade, during which time Crutchfield advanced from announcer to general manager of WBT. He was trading in the species of informality that has made Grady famous.

Having a station manager like Crutchfield has been a comfort to Grady. For Grady Cole not only sits when he broadcasts, but he frequently goes to sleep while he is on the air.

Whereas Grady loves to disparage the whole field of radio and his place in it ("I don't know as I got any thanks to extend to Marconi," he says), he brags on WBT.

He once announced that the dial of his own radio was rusted on WBT's call signal, and asked his listeners about their dials. Over 150 people wrote in and said their dials were rusted there too.

These listeners are just about the only people connected with Grady Cole who take him for granted; think of him as plain old Grady, and don't try to explain him.

About television, Grady says:

"Couldn't call it illegitimate, because radio gave birth to it, and is still supporting it. I'll tell you what TV is doing. It is leading the ham to slaughter. Personally, I am going to wait until the rest of the hams are slaughtered, and then I'll have the field to myself."

Nevertheless, Grady was the first local personality on TV in Charlotte. He was filmed and run on a spot announcement before station WBT had any TV cameras. But, he doesn't have any TV shows or immediate plans. "Radio is doing mighty well," Grady says, "and on TV you don't last long. Life is very, very short."

Eventually, Grady will go into TV, but not until he has developed a deal that will wear well and that looks good to a country fellow.

New York calls Grady a "thyroid" and regards him with a sort of horrified fascination. Folks who work with him in Charlotte are awed by his operation and say that he's a "hungry fighter"—not yet satisfied that he is making enough money or that people like him. Grady makes no attempt to unriddle himself, or to explain how he can work 19 hours day after day, but his secret for getting up in the morning is enlightening.

"I just lie there in bed and think of starving to death. Can't stay in bed," Grady says. "And when I feel overworked, I go out into the country in the summertime and watch a farmer plowing with the sun beating down on him. I'm inspired for a year."

However Grady starts his day or gets his inspiration, he seems to be making out. Over 385 babies have been named for him in the Southeast, and the county agents say that at least one pig out of every litter is called either Grady or Grady Cole.

"Man," Grady says, "I haven't influenced a generation. I've raised one."

THE END