Out of the Blue

The Life and Legend of Kirby "Sky King" Grant

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SAMPLE CHAPTER

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FROM *OUT OF THE BLUE*

The Sky King TV Series

The role of “Schuyler J. King” is said to have been inspired by a real-life flying policeman, Jack Cones, of Twenty-Nine Palms in California.

(Source: Autry Museum)

Sky King began as a radio drama. The radio show was first broadcast in 1946. Earl Nightingale played the part of Sky King in that series. It was a fifteen-minute daily radio serial in 1946, and by 1947 it ran twice a week as a 30-minute program. Complete with organ music and sound effects, the Sky King radio show lasted until 1954. Sky King was probably the last of the aviation-based shows on the radio. (Superman doesn’t count). There were several up to that time. Ask your grandparents if they remember Speed Gibson or Tailspin Tommy. Then there was Anne of the Airlines, Captain Midnight, and Hop Harrigan. Others included Howie Wing, Air Stories of the World War, and the Air Adventures of Jimmy Allen.

Trivia question: Who was the announcer on the radio show? It was the late Mike Wallace, best known for his role on 60 Minutes on CBS. Wallace once said that announcing for the Sky King show began his broadcasting career.

In the radio version, Sky King flew two airplanes. One was a propeller aircraft, dubbed “Songbird.” The other was a jet they called “Flying Arrow”..” In the radio show, no particular models were identified. Still, in one episode, “The Lady Sheriff,” the “flying Arrow” jet carried two passengers. In the script, the Sky King character claimed that it was

equipped with a “20-millimeter cannon”.

The “Flying Arrow” was said to have played a cameo role in a later TV episode. That episode used involving stock footage of a Bell P-59A Airacomet. The P-59A was the USAF’s first jet fighter, but that rumor does not line up with the list of known shows. It was a single-seat twin jet-engine fighter. The plane, designed and built by Bell Aircraft for the first World War. We will have more about the aircraft used in the Sky King series in the next chapter.

Sky King Television Productions

In 1954, Kirby was already beginning his role as Sky King while playing Canadian Mountie roles. The Television role had grown out of the earlier radio series. There were 72 Sky King television shows produced from 1951 to 1958. The show lived on in reruns into the 1960s; and was again syndicated some years later.

It is well known that there were and are only 72 shows produced. There are stories about 130 original shows. That number would include some were “lost” in a fire at Bonded Film Storage in New York. Those stories are not true. However, that being said, when I counted the titles, the total comes to 73. First season: 20, second season: 20, third season 20 shows, and the fourth season: 13 shows. 60 plus 13 is 73. (See the list later in this chapter).

(Photo source: Imagezone.com)

According to one source, much of the series was shot at Corriganville, a stage set owned by “Crash” Corrigan. (Source: AeroMovies.FR)

The series was a low-cost, black, and white production, with a large part of the budget going to operating the planes. “Sky King” was first broadcast on NBC, then it moved to ABC, and finally to CBS on Saturday mornings. The production schedule most often involved shooting two shows each week.

The Sky King show was produced at three separate times as the sponsors changed. In 1951 and 1952, the sponsor was Derby Foods, advertising Peter Pan Peanut Butter. Back then, Derby Foods was a subsidiary of Swift and Company. Peter Pan, by the way, was the first

peanut butter sold in plastic jars. The brand is now part of Con-Agra. Between 1955-1956 and 1957-1958 were sponsored by Nabisco. That is the sponsor most associated with the show. The sponsor was identified by an animated stick figure cowboy and horse. Nabisco syndicated (distributed) to locations where products were not producing adequate sales. The Sky King show succeeded in boosting sales in those markets.

Revolvy.com reports the television show first appeared on Sunday afternoons on NBC-TV. That was between September 16th, 1951, and October 26th, 1952. The following year, those episodes were replayed in ABC's Saturday morning lineup. In September 21, 1953 it made its prime-time debut on ABC's Monday night lineup. In Cessna's hometown of Wichita, Kansas, it was broadcast at 6 pm. The show ran twice-a-week in August and September 1954, before ABC canceled it.

More episodes were produced when the fourth season of the show went into syndication in 1955. The series aired well into the sixties and beyond.

The last new episode, "Mickey's Birthday", aired on March 8, 1959. In the shows, "Mickey" was a relative of Sky King, portrayed in three 1959 episodes by child actor Gary Hunley. (Source: IMDB)

The Sky King TV series resurfaced on the CBS Saturday schedule in reruns until September, 1966. I remember seeing the show in Central Florida on WDBO-TV, Channel 6, CBS. when the program director was Walter "Uncle Walt" Sickles.

Nabisco either sold or gave the series and the rights to Kirby Grant in 1959. In a deal with Kirby in the 1970s Bob Yde (Television Syndication Company), syndicated the series. In my late teens,

I had worked as a film editor at television stations in the Tampa area. I became involved with the cleaning and shipping of the television prints. We set up shop in a spare bedroom of our small home near Sanford, Florida.

Kirby held out hopes of reviving and updating the series, but he could not generate enough interest. He also had hopes of a Sky King theme park.

Michael s did research about the show for his book about Sky King. Mike said that the video rights to the television shows later went to "a gentleman in Tennessee". That "gentleman" was Bill Campbell. Now, the rights for all but four are owned by Ron Muercke, who operated the SkyKing.com website.

The last four episodes of season four reverted to Public Domain.

Most of the action takes place in the “cowboy country” of Arizona. The exterior scenes were shot in the desert of southern California. The Flying Crown Ranch featured in the series was a house in the Apple Valley subdivision, near the small airport of the same name. Members of the cast stayed at the Apple Valley Inn, then owned by Roy Rogers and Dale Evans. Many of the scenes were near the mountains of San Bernardino, near China Lake and George AFB military base.

The show was a success. Sky King became “the favorite flying cowboy,” as it said in the credits and the commercials airing within the show. In recent years, the Sky King shows have become somewhat of a cult series. As was typical of children’s shows of the time, rarely were any shots fired and nobody was ever killed in the action.

Gloria Winters played the role of Penny King, niece to “Uncle Sky” in episodes from 1952 to 1959. In an interview, Gloria claimed she was a licensed pilot. She met her husband on the set of the Sky King series when he was the “sound man”. In a television interview, Gloria said that her husband was also a licensed pilot.

Jimmy Buffett’s song, Pencil-Thin Mustache, includes a reference to Penny King’s character in the Sky King show. It’s in the third verse:

I remember bein’ buck-toothed and skinny
Writin’ fan letters to Sky’s niece Penny
Oh I wish I had a pencil-thin mustache
Then I could solve some mysteries, too

One responder to our online survey told us, “To this day I still have a crush on Sky’s Niece Penny.”

Many male viewers found a similar attraction to “Penny”. The character never actually had a boyfriend in the series. In the shows, her attention was to flying and horses. Gloria herself had a running romance with horses since the age of two. Her actual family lived on Rodeo Drive in Beverly Hills. A bridle path ran down the center of the street, where several movie and Western stars exercised their horses. Gloria aspired to be a cowgirl. In the Sky King show, she got her wish.

In one episode, “her” horse was a small black-and-white pinto. The scripts sometimes called for her to ride other horses. Gloria was all of five feet, one and a half inches. It’s understandable why she preferred “short” horses. “When I have to mount a tall horse it becomes a real production”.

Gloria never trained a horse to do tricks. She was introduced to a trick horse known as “Tony”, the “Wonder Horse”, and she was impressed with “Tony”. He could come at a whistle, walk on his hind legs, do the “prayer” trick, play sick, nod his head in answer to questions, and whinny on cue. Gloria couldn’t get the horse to do any of those things until the trainer showed her how, and then it was easy. She could motion with a whip and say “up” and Tony would respond by rising on his hind legs. (Source, another obscure un-credited magazine reprint).

Gloria Winters died on August 14th, 2010 at her home in Vista, Calif., north of San Diego. She was in her late 70s. Her family told the Los Angeles Times the cause of death was complications of pneumonia. (Source: New York Times, Anita Gates)

Ronald F. Hagerthy was born on March 9th, 1932. He appeared as “Skipper” in nineteen Sky King episodes, along with a long list of drama and sit-com rolls. During the time the Sky King series was in production, Hagerthy was drafted into the army. The Sky King script kept saying that he was in the Air Force, hoping he could one day return to the series after he got out. For whatever reason, it didn’t happen. He married his school sweetheart, Patti Taylor, and at last report was living in Newport Beach, California. In 2024, he was 92 years old.

Ewing Mitchell played Grover County Sheriff Mitch in the series. He played similar roles with Gene Autry (14) and Roy Rogers (4 shows). He also appeared in one episode of the CBS series The Millionaire and a long list of other drama and western shows. Mitchel acted in the first season of *The Adventures of Rin Tin Tin*. Mitchell, like Kirby Grant, also had a musical background. He passed away in 1988 in La Jolla, California. His death was reportedly from a stroke that resulted from a fall from a ladder.

Composer Herschel Burke Gilbert composed most of the musical score. At least, that is according to a Wikipedia post.

There was even one Sky King script that involved a space shot. A well-understood rule on the set was that there was to be no smoking in front

of the kids. Remember, this was back in the 1950s.

On August 28th, 1995, the Family Channel reran the series. Gus Lucas, Family Channel VP of Programming, described it as “corny to the point of being hilarious”. Critics were more kind during the show’s original run. They described the writing of the series as “above average”, but “not so much” for the acting. Some actors who appeared in the series were Jill St. John and Glenn Strange. Darryl Hickman (better known for his roles in Doby Gillis and Gilligan) also appeared in the series. Sammee Tong played a part in one show. None of the stars of the television show received any royalties on the airplay.

A 1985 report in the Sun Sentinel newspaper said

> “Mr. Grant tried repeatedly but unsuccessfully for several years to revive the television series that made him famous. He dreamed of shooting a new Sky King series in Florida and often spoke enthusiastically of using Kennedy Space Center and Embry-Riddle Aeronautical University in Daytona Beach as story locations.”

The Accidental Stunt Pilot

In her blog, Dayle Fergusson relates how her husband, Bill, became involved with the Sky King show. Back then, in the late fifties, Bill was working for Cessna Aircraft Company in Wichita, Kansas. He was national sales manager for their new twin, the Cessna 310. Bill flew around the country, demonstrating the plane to potential customers. The sponsor of the show, Nabisco, approached Cessna about providing a new plane for the series. They had retired the old Cessna T-50 (the Bamboo Bomber). Cessna jumped at the idea as a great way to promote their new twin airplane. They agreed to provide the airplane at no cost for several weeks of filming.

(Photo: the three Fergussons and the Songbird III promotion plane)

Pilot Bill Fergusson didn’t plan on piloting the new Songbird for the TV production.

Bill Fergusson and the Songbird II, Photo provided courtesy of Dayle Furguson

Here is what I learned from Dayle Fergusson.... Bill delivered a sparkling new Cessna 310B to the filming site at Apple Valley, California.

The stunt pilot next on the assignment list for the job was only a single-engine rated pilot. Cessna told Bill to stay long enough to check out the new guy for a twin-engine rating, and then return to Wichita. “He’s doing great,” Bill reported to his boss, Frank Martin, “but I can’t sign him off. The insurance company would never approve it.” “What do you mean?” his boss exploded. “The flying involves landing on roads and dry lake beds, flying under bridges, and landing with both engines shut down. He’s just not up to that sort of flying yet. Maybe they can provide another pilot.”, Bill explained. The McGowen Brothers were already breathing down Martin’s neck, eager to begin filming. Everyone’s blood pressure was rising. Martin snapped: “Well you stay and do the flying yourself,” and he slammed down the phone. Bill soon discovered it was some of the most fun flying he had ever done since his military days.

For the next two weeks, his job was to play double for Sky King. He wore an enormous cowboy hat for close-up shots at the controls of the plane. He put the plane through an intensive program of adventurous flying. The production company created a library of every imaginable sequence they might need. Months later, they added more sequences using a different plane to add to the library. There’s a quote in Wikipedia referencing a published article “310B Goes to Hollywood”. It quotes Bill Ferguson as recalling how Kirby Grant “flew the 310B like a real pro in no time”. I finally found the article as a scan from an old website. It appears to have been written between 1956 and 1959, which would have been episodes 40 to 73. That was the time the 310 began appearing in the Sky King shows. The article’s author’s name does not appear in the reprint. It’s just as well it doesn’t. The quote from Bill Ferguson does not actually appear in the article. The quote also completely contradicts statements in an interview Bill had with Michael McMurtrey in later years.

The TV series was made for the kids or the housewives of middle America of the fifties. Kirby voiced ads for Peter Pan peanut butter or Nabisco biscuits. His suave voice in the ads was in the purest traditions of the singing cowboys of the time, including Roy Rogers and Gene Autry. Kirby Grant was as much a true singer as any of the “singing cowboys,” but he never sang in the TV series. Speaking of singing cowboys, Kirby, Gene Autry and Roy Rogers were all friends. Many of the episodes start with the

same sentence: “Out of the blue of the western sky, comes Sky King!” But in some, the announcer says “Out of the CLEAR blue...” You can hear several examples of the opening sequence on YouTube. One is found here:

(Scan with mobile device)

and the other is found here:

(Scan with mobile device)

So the answer to which one was “real” is... both. If you know anybody of the right age, you might win a free beer with that trivia question. Some references list a third variation, “FROM out of the blue...”

Meanwhile, back at the ranch...

In the television shows, the exterior of a home in a subdivision near what was once the Apple Valley Airport was the Flying Crown Ranch. It has been (understandably) remodeled extensively since the time of the television show.

(www.thisdayinaviation.com - Jack Chertoff Television Productions)

This still image captured from the series shows the Songbird parked at the “Flying Crown Ranch”. The show made it appear that it was at the front door of a large ranch estate. Sometimes, they taxied the plane down streets from the nearby airport and park it in front. The house in the residential area used for the exterior shots. The airport that appeared in most of the TV shows was not in Arizona. It was the Apple Valley Airport, in Apple Valley, CA. To find the location, enter the coordinates in Google Earth or find it on an aeronautical map: 34°31’14.99″N, 117°13′19.46″W. Nearby, the Apple Valley Inn served as the base of operations. Today there is a Super Target shopping center where the airport had been. What remains today is a small piece of the original run-up area. It appears southwest of the intersection of Dale Evans Parkway and Thunderbird Road near California Highway 18. It appears in this aerial view.

(Image credit: Google Earth)

Another example of a Sky King myth is found in a newspaper item dated June 11th, 2006. The title is “Sky King star landed in Valley Center”.

In it, reporter Vincent Nicolas Rossi, says:

> "In real life, Kirby Grant, the actor who played Sky King, was indeed a flier and a rancher, and until his death in 1985, his ranch was in Valley Center. Just south of the intersection of Lake Wohlford Road and Valley Center Road is the remnant of an airstrip. This was Grant's private strip, according to Bob Lerner of the Valley Center History Museum. Grant's home was at the end of the airstrip, fronting on Valley Center Road. "

(Image credit: Google Earth) Location map today

We won't go into detail to point them out, but there are more than a few problems with the story.

Excerpted from *Out of the Blue: The Life and Legend of Kirby "Sky King" Grant* by Tim Trott. Visit TimTrottWrites.com for the current selection of books.