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By Arthur Diers for The Chicago Literary Club

Steve Allen made me laugh. His quip, his cackle, his intelligent eyes—stayed with me. Then I learned that he came from Chicago. He was born in New York and died in LA, but he was raised in Chicago.

His name is Stephen Valentine Patrick William Allen. He is the only son of Isabella Donahue whose stage name is Belle Montrose, and Carroll Allen, whose stage name is Billy Allen. Belle was born and raised in Chicago. Steve writes in his autobiography that her father "was a fierce, bearded farmer from County Cork, Ireland, married Bridget Scanlon, a meek, patient country girl, sometime well before the turn of the century, and brought her to America where…she gave birth to sixteen children, several of whom died in childbirth." He writes, "The boys in the family were high-spirited, independent, argumentative, popular, wild, and unruly. The girls were the same with long hair…The only thing that made the endless bickering at all tolerable was the sense of humor with which the family was blessed. There was always an atmosphere of fearful tension…moments of calm non-existent…Grandfather couldn't take it…lost all control…washed his hands of it all and returned to Ireland until the end of his life."

Steve was the only child to surpass the fifth grade. Nobody in the family was sensible. "They never learned tolerance or logic or intellectual curiosity or brotherly love or love of the

arts…"They were either loving or hating each other furiously. The hate broke up home after home time after time. All were hard workers except for Uncle Steve who could never find a job.

The Watson sisters, circus aerialists, lived down the street, Belle's mother permitted her to join them on the circuit when she was nine years old. She soon became a working acrobat with Barnum and Bailey. She moved on to become a chorus girl and finally she found her niche as a comedienne, developing an act with her straight man, Billy Allen, whom she married and with whom they had one child—Steve. Billy, Steve's father, died eighteen months after Steve was born. Belle had to work to survive, had to travel all the time, sometimes with Steve and sometimes he stayed with relatives.

When he was only a few months old he fell ill in San Francisco spending many months in the hospital. Aunt Rose was sent to be with him. When he was returned to his mother he greeted her with a slap in the face with all his little might and mother slapped him firmly back. He was often boarded for many months away from his mother in one or another chaotic relatives' home. When he was with his mother he was alone much of the time in a hotel room. He was sporadically tended by someone in the circus family. He was frequently found outside wandering around looking for his mother. He waited patiently during the circus performances waiting for her routine

to begin, hoping to see her for a few minutes. He knew every word and nuance of her routine.

He writes, “Such talent as I have was inherited from this covey of nervous wrecks. Unfortunately, from the Donohue’s viewpoint, I also inherited from my father’s side a certain modest amount of common sense and the ability to think with a certain degree of rationality.” He tried repeatedly to give voice to reason in the midst of chaos. He was made fun of for doing so. Over and over again they called him, “wiseacre” so rudely that he gave up. He was reduced to silence. He stopped saying anything. He persisted in not saying anything. Then he was nicknamed the “sphinx”.

When Steve’s father died and grandfather left he was the lone male in the house. There was one fellow, who was not always around, often unaccountably gone. But his presence was important. It was Uncle Steve, or Big Steve; the closest thing he had to a father-figure. Big Steve was usually away after a big fight following a drinking spree. They thought perhaps he went to an old soldier’s home here or there, or simply wandered about in a hobo-like way. He would sometimes write a brief letter, or turn up unexpectedly—the women always worried about him. Steve writes: “When he did come home he’d be drunk and ugly, would rant and rave, insult my mother and sisters…he’d smash cups and drinking glasses, threaten to kill Aunt Mag and mother, but he never really laid a hand on them and through it all he was never angry or cross with me.”

When he was sober and in good spirits he'd take Steve to the zoo or the circus or a walk around the park, or to a museum. Never mind school. He was protective of Steve, particularly because Steve as a young child was frequently ill and spent a great deal of time in bed. Big Steve, however, encouraged him to get stronger and keep his back straight.

Once, when Steve was about eight years old, Big Steve frightened him in fun in a dark hallway at night, "Boo!" Steve was so frightened that he lashed out and kicked Big Steve in the shin with a steel-tipped shoe leaving a permanent mark on him. Big Steve responded by taking him in his arms to comfort him, apologizing for scaring him. After that little Steve frequently enjoyed scaring people for fun, and then talking them into making it all better. He and his friends were pranksters, dressing up like monsters and hiding in the alley to jump out and scare people. Sometimes the police were called and they had to talk their way out of trouble.

Big Steve was big and strong, frequently got into fights when drunk, and most often won when he was younger, but had no sense about his limitations as he got older. He came home bloody. He sang some romantic songs, but had no sexual interest in women. He had a good sense of humor. He wouldn't tell jokes but he did see humor in many situations. He would speak often of Tap Max and Calingo Red, and no one knew what he was talking about. It was just funny. He liked railroads probably rode on them and sometimes imagined that he'd

worked on one, occasionally dressing up like a railroad man. He spoke of the Far West and farms and mountains having traveled far and wide. He'd call himself "The poor Missouri boy."

In assessing his uncle's influence on him Steve decided that by listening to him he knew what to do, but his behavioral example was "deplorable." Big Steve had frequently expressed admiration for Clarence Darrow, Luther Burbank, Thomas Edison and Abraham Lincoln. He counseled Steve to learn from them. Can you think of anyone better?

Aunt Rose and Uncle Charlie took care of Big Steve as he grew older. He made their life miserable and they loved him dearly. Childless they had someone to take care of. Years later when he died Steve Allen went to the funeral and was astonished to see that the body of all cleaned up Big Steve in the coffin looked exactly like himself.

Steve's schooling included about eighteen different schools—sometimes because he was following his mother, at other times with a relative. When mother had more money he was sent to a boarding school run by nuns where he was in a lot of fights with bullies and learned to use his wits to joke them out of their wicked swings. He was incredibly lonely in the third and fourth grades in this school. He had no one to talk to or comfort to be had. He often would forget school and go to museums with Big Steve if he was around or wander the streets. While at Hyde Park High a teacher took him in hand, got him on the staff of

the school newspaper for which he wrote anecdotes. She also checked on him every day to see that he was there.

He had frequent attacks of asthma, had great difficulty breathing. After a particularly acute attack his mother that very day took off with him to Arizona where he graduated from high school. Due to his experience in Hyde Park he excelled in writing and was recommended for a scholarship to study radio broadcasting in a new program at Drake University in Des Moines, Iowa. There he reveled in learning, and had a chance to experience a normal adolescence with ordinary peers in the stable situation which a small Midwestern university provides. He went to the ball games, partied with friends, played the piano with a band, loved his studies, was finding his calling, danced with the girls. He called it one of the happiest times of his life.

But he couldn't afford to return. The scholarship was for one year. So he went back to Arizona where he found a part-time job in a radio station and dropped out of further schooling after a brief effort at Arizona State University.

Over the years as a child he had many absurd thoughts running through his head. He never talked about them, but gradually found himself talking out loud from them, feeling shame about disclosing himself. But, much to his amazement, he found people laughing in response to them.

His job at the radio station was to play records through the night. He got bored with that so started making more and more

comments as he went along. Management objected to his spontaneity, but found that more and more people were listening, so Steve talked them into letting him continue with his patter. Actually, he received a long letter explaining why he was being fired, a letter which he read on the radio. His fans bombarded management so he was reinstated. More people started coming to the station to watch and listen to him until they had to move him to a theatre. He was finding his niche.

The shame that goes with so much emotional turmoil in childhood made him terrified when he was called upon to speak or play the piano. He would make light of everything emotional, laugh at times of danger not because he was not afraid but because he was afraid and had to find a way to relax the tension. It took many years to overcome these fears. The laughter he elicited soothed him and encouraged him to perform the more. It made him feel better and better.

While attending Arizona State Teacher's College he met a tall, black-haired, green-eyed Phoenician—Dorothy Goodman. He fell in love. Later he was sure he had fallen in love with love first and with Dorothy second. Dorothy was eighteen and Steve was twenty. They were with each other every minute and felt terrible when they were apart—both were ready for intimacy. Their parents objected to the marriage. Their religions differed. The war was coming. Steve was drafted. There was urgency about getting married. The thought of being apart was intolerable.

While he was in boot camp at Camp Roberts they were wed in a chapel near Paso Roples. His mother spent her last cent providing a luncheon for the occasion. The honeymoon was a night in the rundown Taylor Hotel. It was hard to find a little room for them since so many military men overwhelmed the capacity of this small town. Several weeks later, however, Steve was placed in a gunnery training unit. Hauling machine guns up and down hills precipitated a recurrence of his asthma, so he was drummed out of the corps and returned to Phoenix and the radio job he had relinquished.

A few months later a son was born and Steve had to get another job to supplement his income. He played the piano at a local club. He never took piano lessons, couldn't read music, but played most anything by ear. As part of his patter as a disk jockey he began developing some screwy characters like Claude Horribly—trying out silly voices, a wide range of them. He became friends with a natural comic—Wendell Noble, and began doing an act with him which caught on sufficiently to get a trial program going for the station. But it didn't last long. Wendell got a better job in LA.

Steve saved as much as he could because he was intent on getting to Los Angeles where he could get a better job and where there was the possibility of developing his career. Dorothy, on the other hand wanted to spend the money on household things. She wanted to settle down in Phoenix, wanted to be a small town housewife, enjoying recipes, small

town gossip, women's magazines, family ties. He insisted on following his plan. He knew that he was not the best kind of husband for this woman. He writes "Born in a trunk, having always led a Gypsy life, having from the first known excitement and insecurity and music, and poetry and laughter and drama, I was very poor casting indeed for the role of small town husband and father." He had to follow his plan. With the thousand dollars he saved, he thought he could easily find work in LA. In fact, it took several very, very painful months for him to find something, once so sure of an offer that he brought his family to the city only to find that he had indulged in wishful thinking. Just when he was about to give up and move back to Phoenix three job offers came his way, and he took the one that offered the most money—a staff announcer at station KFAC on Wilshire Boulevard.

It was primarily a music station specializing in classical music about which he knew very little. So he found himself mixing up records which had to be turned over and came in large stacks. He thought that Beethoven and Brahms and Mozart must be turning over in their graves reacting to his mix-ups.

He and his family lived in Playa del Rey on the wrong side of the tracks, some distance from the station. Dorothy didn't feel ok about being alone with the baby all night, so they would pack up in the old Ford, and Dorothy and the baby would find an empty office to settle in for the night. One night the Ford ran out of gas in the middle of the night with no gas stations open,

the baby crying with no milk to feed him, no one stopping to help for half an hour. Steve remembered that an old acquaintance from Hyde Park High, Mel Torme, lived nearby. When finally someone stopped he got a push to Mel Torme's home where he and his family were warmly welcomed. He and Mel tried to use a hose to get gas from one tank to another, getting a mouthful of gas with no success. So they enjoyed each other's company until the gas station opened, and then were given a push to get the old Ford going.

There was not enough money available to replace the 1932 Model A Ford which had a shattered right window, no paint, and soon required pushing to start every time, requiring parking in just the right place with some downhill allowing Steve and Dorothy to push until Steve could jump in and get it going. The two and a half years at Playa del Rey were not the best.

When KMTR offered him a job for ten dollars a week more he jumped at the chance, happy that that station was in Hollywood. Old friend, Wendell Noble, worked nearby at KHJ, the Don Lee Mutual Network, and they began talking about renewing their professional partnership. They thought they could do better than the daytime programming extant. The idea was that Wendell would sing and Steve play the piano and they would indulge in patter "aimed at that imaginary personage so dear to the hearts of radio executives: the typical American housewife. Management liked it, sold it immediately

to a sponsor and they were set to start immediately getting an audience covering the entire West Coast. Steve quit his KMT job, bought a house in Venice, large enough to accommodate a second child who was on the way.

After the first flush of success it dawned on them that they were not ready for a fifteen minute show five days a week. After two weeks they had exhausted the material they had used to sell the show. So they frantically found all their old jokes, visited every used bookstore to find old joke books, invented new characters to provide some action like Claude Horribly and Manuel Labor. After a few weeks they were entirely exhausted and prepared to quit, when management called them in to tell them that they were so much appreciated that they were going to hire a writer and a female singer to complement their work. At the last minute they were saved. Their audience grew by leaps and bounds. They hired a clever young lady named June Foray. Wendell no longer had to play old ladies, colored maids or society matrons. They hired an accompanist noted for his skill on the organ—Skitch Henderson. This show lasted a year and a half. On the side they tried to start a night club act at the Casbah to pick up some real money. The sailors booed them down, preferring to see dancing girls, not semi-sophisticated funny jokesters.

The radio program, the Smile Train, lasted for a year and a half and Steve called it the best training program he had, preparing him for a career in comedy. When this program was over Steve

and Wendell could not find work together, so Wendell found some singing jobs and Steve had to go back to spinning records on a late night program. He thought it a come-down, but it turned out to be a boon. He went into his usual pattern of being more entertaining than the records, gaining a following of a growing audience in the studio at 11 pm. showings. He added interviews with entertainers as a regular part of his repertoire. One night Doris Day was to be the guest, but she didn't show. He was nonplussed. What to do? He found himself picking up the heavy floor microphone and talking to members of the audience. People laughed. He discovered that engaging an audience in spontaneous banter is the most dependable way of all to strike the magic fire of laughter... He wrote, "The funniest things are not jokes we hear on the radio or at the movies, but the real life social faux pas, slips of the tongue, and fumblings and bumblings that amused men for millions of years before anyone ever thought of being funny on a professional basis."

His interviews are deliberately nonsensical. If they become sensible this trend must immediately be deliberately derailed. A woman asks, "Mr. Allen, is your family with you in the studio tonight?" To which Steve replies, "Why do you ask? Is your husband a burglar?" Or another woman comments, "I just bought your new album. I can't get over the way you play the piano." To which he responds, "It was a long time before my piano teacher could get over it, too!"

The late forties were the golden days of wrestling, and Steve was invited to do the commentary without any knowledge of the sport. He learned about some of the names of holds and learned to talk about them glibly. But, he writes, “As the evening wore on the various chunky bodies that writhed and rolled before me began to assume positions that had never occurred to me and for which I had no terminology. I began to say any absurd thing I could think of, comforted by the knowledge that after all I was hired to get laughs…Leone gives Smith a full nelson now, slipping it up from either a half nelson or an Ozzie Nelson. Now the boys go into a double pretzel bend with variations on a theme by Velox and Yolanda. Whoops, Leone takes his man down to the mat! He has him pinned. Down they roll. It’s sort of a rolling pin…By the way its Ladies’ night here at Ocean Park, folks. There’s still time to come on down, and you don’t even have to prove you’re a lady.” “There’s a lot of cigar smoke here…this is the only wrestling arena where they cure hams from the ceiling.”

During the three years of the late night Steve Allen show the audiences grew and grew reaching a thousand in the theatre on weekends. It grew because Steve invited the premiere entertainers of the day, who readily accepted the invitation because Steve made them comfortable, enjoyed their company and let them shine. Al Jolson came on after the movie about him and sang a dozen songs and shared his life story. Gloria Swanson “just after her smashing comeback in Sunset Boulevard spent the whole program chattering delightfully,

making jokes, singing, teasing, answering questions from the audience, and making it clear why she has been regarded as the epitome of femininity and glamuor for so many years.

In December of 1949 Dorothy gave birth to a third child, David. The family moved into a newly purchased home in the San Fernando Valley. A year later the marriage exploded. "Exploded" is the word he used. He found it so painful he was never able to talk about it or write about it. It blew him up. He can only talk around it. It began three years of tragedy. He had grown up with constant emotional upheaval—glass-breaking, bickering, shouting, brawling, yet these relationships were not totally disrupted. He glossed over conflicts in his marriage as his family had glossed over their problems. This relationship was really falling apart.

He became conscious of some "inherited family failings—a short temper, unease with strangers, a feeling of intellectual superiority." He became aware. "Fate finally rubbed my nose in the fact that I was not a man at all, only a boy in adult's clothing." "I was a dangerous driver", he writes. "I would retaliate when cut off in traffic, would consciously grind gears when angry, would speed consistently."

He moved his work to New York during this period because his program could only be conducted to reach the entire country from that location at the time. He acquired a home in Connecticut to which he brought his family—to no avail. His

conscience was set to follow his marriage vows, but he was driven to divorce, and he couldn't stand it. He was in agony.

Friends tried to get him to take some time off, but he found that he had to perform his shows, using some part of his brain to carry on his work, even though he could not function otherwise. But his mood in shows became darker and the reviews confirmed it. When he thinks about that period later, he can"t understand how he could do it night after night, ad lib jokes a mile a minute and at the moment enjoy himself. After the show there was the lonely walk in the parking lot, the drive home into the darkness, feeling that at the age of twenty-eight he had made a total mess of his life. Those early fifties were the most miserable years of his life.

It did help him to begin to talk with friends about his problems. He felt so helpless. He turned to prayer. Reading everything he could about prayer, talking with religious leaders, like Bishop Scheen. He read Thomas Merton, and Aristotle who wrote that prayer was "of no avail." He read St. Francis, St. Augustine, Thomas a Kempis. He came to the conclusion that "the most meaningful form of prayer is the prayer of thanksgiving, the prayer for grace, the prayer that we may be given strength to improve our spiritual selves… for wisdom, for a love for peace, for an increase in charity. This makes us better able to love one another."

He wrote an article for Look Magazine about prayer, expressing the view that the heart of Christianity is loving one's neighbor.

He writes, “Man has always done rather well when it comes to the formalities of religion; he will willingly burn incense, sacrifice lambs, make pilgrimages…light candles, sing hymns, march in processions, make certain signs and gestures, tithe his salary, and all the rest of it, but he will usually be God damned (if you will pardon a play on words in this paradox) if he will love his neighbor.”

Years later he writes: “It is interesting that as a result of this great upheaval my mind became stimulated as never before in my search for knowledge…I became fascinated at finding myself afoot in the wonderful world of ideas.” He began searching for truth, becoming aware of ideas contrary to his own…devouring books of any intellectual description—Thomas Paine, Bertrand Russell, Bishop Sheen. From philosophy and theology he turned to history—Gibbon and Durant. He subscribed to the conservative National Review, the Communist Worker, and the iconocasts in the Realist, The Progressive World, the Independent. He “scrambled furiously through books…sometimes reading ten or twelve at a time…rushing from one to another.”

He delighted in the bright spots in history—the beautiful thoughts of many philosophers, the heroism of a few saints, the works of a small number of artists and writers, the accomplishments of a few scientists. But he finds most of man’s history is a story of shame rather than glory. He becomes convinced that all of history shows that man has expended

vastly more energy combating progress rather than furthering it.

He calls it his mental awakening. An awakening, creative explosions one after the other. Within a few years he appeared in a play on Broadway, made a major motion picture, did a variety of television programs, wrote hundreds of songs, made some twenty-five record albums, and engaged in a number of business activities.

But this awakening was slow to develop. For a while he had to wander round at loose ends. He palled around w:th actors and comedians and one day encountered Jayne Meadows who was part of that crowd. He was astounded by her. He writes: " She is big and beautiful and a bit overwhelming. You are suddenly confronted by a barrage of red hair and earrings and perfume and eyelashes and a generous wide pink mouth that keeps talking and smiling and gasping and laughing… she has glamour."

When he first met Jayne his emotional slump was not yet over, his work took a dip. Jackie Gleason beat him out of his Saturday night gig. His day program was winding down. The late night offering just felt wrong to him. He spent more time with his comedy and theater friends, so bumped into Jayne more often. She was also recovering from a painful divorce. Neither of them was ready for a relationship.

Jayne was a missionary's daughter who grew up in China. She began an acting career in New York theatre, then to Hollywood where she appeared in a number of movies—Undercurrent with Robert Taylor and Kathryn Hepburn, Lady In the Lake with Robert Montgomery, Enchantment with David Niven, Luck of the Irish with Tyrone Power and many others. She was an electric performer. Yet, some inner insecurity had made her temperamental and difficult for producers to handle. Her marriage broke up. She turned down one offer after another, so finally gave it all up and returned to New York to live with her sister Audrey. She and Steve became two lost souls who gave each other strength. They hung with the theatre crowd. Finally, Steve asked her for a date. It was to the Planetarium. He would boast that his first date was to "take her to the moon."

Steve describes their first year or two as "wild, exciting New Yorkish years, introducing Jayne, who had been raised in Connecticut by two missionary parents, to the smoky Greenwich Village jazz scene. Intensely they shared each other's deepest insecurities and longings. And there was the fact that Steve was practically out of work. Jayne convinced him to try the theatre—her world. She had connections. Her friend Mark Goodson offered him a job on the panel of What's My Line, a replacement for Hal Block whose job it was to interject jokes and silly comments from time to time. The job fit Steve perfectly. He had to offer a wise crack here and there. He was paid to have a jovial time with good company—Dorothy

Kilgallen, Bennett Cerf and Arlene Francis with no preparation needed. “It was like stealing money.” One of his lines from this show has had legs. He coined the phrase, “Bigger than a breadbox.”

As the relationship with Jayne deepened he realized how much psychoanalysis had helped her, so he dived into therapy for a year himself and felt that it profited him immensely. But he was never about to reveal any details of his inner life. He kept personal things to himself. Because he had more time (His daily weeknight program on CBS had been canceled.) he followed her suggestion that he give theatre a try. He accepted the invitation to take the lead in a play—The Pink Elephant, written by John Fuller. He enjoyed the challenge immensely subsequently was given many offers, but the play foundered. It ran only four months on the road and four days in New York, leaving him exhausted, but he wouldn’t have missed It for the world. Many of his ad libs found their way into the script.

His big break came when at the last minute he was invited to fill in for Arthur Godfrey’s wildly popular talent show. On the spur of the moment he turned Godfrey’s live Lipton tea and soup commercial’s upside down. He deliberately prepared the soup and tea on camera and then proceeded to pour each of them into Godrey’s iconic ukulele . The applause was uproarious and on and on. Variety declared it the most hilarious one man comedy sequences ever projected.

Then Ted Cott the head of NBC's New York outlet recognized that Steve was just the man to emcee a daily nighttime variety show which he could sell to the Knickerbocker beer people. They provided Bobbie Byrne and his orchestra, Steve Lawrence and Eydie Gorme. There was very little script, ad lib chatter, audience interviews, piano playing, and great singers. It was a hit from the start and quickly made into coast to coast programming. Steve was in his element—on his way.

Over the next couple of decades he hosted one variety show after another, weekly early evening and then the late night show. There was always a live exchange with popular performers—Bob Hope, Kim Novak, Errol Flynn, Abbot and Costello, Esther Williams, Jerry Lewis, Martha Reye, The Three Stooges and many others. His regulars included Tom Posten, a dullard who could never remember his own name, Louie Nye, an adman who came in with a "Hi, Ho, Steverino". Don Knotts was an exceedingly jittery man who when asked if he was nervous would emphatically shout "No." Harrington was an Italian immigrant, a wild-eyed zany fellow who would respond to everything with a "Why Not!"

He featured much music, boosting many a career. Steve Lawrence and Eydie Gorme, Sammy Davis, Jr. He introduced Steve Martin and Albert Brooks for the first time. He often punctuated his jokes with an appropriate chord on the piano. He helped the Polaroid camera become popular by using it

regularly on the program, and was smart enough to arrange to be reimbursed with stocks.

Once he caught sight of himself and his messy hair on the monitor and began giggling --uncontrollably. His infectious laughter caught on fire with the audience and they laughed uproariously as he struggled desperately to affix his hair with each effort making it messier. It was one of the longest laughing episodes on live TV in history.

The only organization he joined was one committed to ridding the world of nuclear bombs. He feared that mutual destruction could only be avoided if all nuclear bombs were banned. When he was in New York he confronted the mob. There were threats. His friends persuaded him to back off. A youth in the South was given the death penalty after committing a minor offense. He propelled a movement to object to this injustice and was successful. He was always willing to give a free show for a good cause.

He interviewed people in the audience and on the street, claiming his best laughs came from chance encounters with regular folks. He floundered in a salad bowl, jumped into a lake of jello, brought on an elephant, made himself into a human tea bag-- laughing all the way. He was happily mad; his laugh was infectious. He held his own in competition with Maverick and Ed Sullivan's show. When he was doing daily shows and a variety show on Sunday, all getting top ratings, he told the network it was too much. So they decided to have him

concentrate on beginning the Tonight Show—the grandfather of them all. He was the grandfather of all the succeeding Tonight shows. Schmok, schmok was his signature line. Whenever he would call in out it would get an uproarious laugh. Schmok, Schmok.

The fifty or so books he wrote included an autobiography of his early life, descriptions of the best comics in his generation and an analysis of what makes people laugh. In this book he elaborates the many ways in which people find something funny, coming to the conclusion that everyone has a funny bone, but the funny bone is activated in a wild variety of ways. Each person has to discern what he or she finds to be funny. And whatever that is has to be cultivated. The more a person laughs the healthier he'll be.

He was convinced that much can be learned from history and developed a program to educate the populace—Meeting of the Minds. Of all his accomplishments this was the one of which he was most proud. He brought back to life Socrates, Marie Antoinette, Thomas Paine, Sir Thomas More, Atilla the Hun, Karl Mark, Emilie Dickenson, Charles Darwin, Galileo, and many others.

They covered racism, women's rights, crime and punishment, slavery, religious toleration—with brilliant conversational scripts. We could hear about ideas on TV. Jayne Meadows was part of dramatizing these ideas. She was offended by how crude Atilla the Hun was, but was informed that the

commanders who conquered the British empire were no softies either. Another of his books—Dumbth declaimed the quality of education in the country and the dumbing down of TV.

Steve also wrote more than eight and a half thousand songs. We may remember “Picnic,” “Impossible,” “This could be the start of something great.” Steve wrote the score for the TV adaptation of Alice in Wonderland in 1985. He starred in the leading role in the movie, “The Benny Goodman Story”. Occasionally he would have a serious show with a talented guest like Carl Sandburg.

During the last days of his life he was in the middle of writing a book—an effort to elevate the moral standards of the television industry. The title was going to be “Vulgarity at the Gates”. It was Halloween. The day before he had carried on a three hour show at an Encino auditorium where his grandchildren had gone to school, to a full house where the crowd was rollicking throughout. He was going over to his son Bill’s house to play with his grandchildren as they created jack-o-lanterns. A big sports vehicle backed out of a garage and hit his car broadside. Not much damage was done. They exchanged insurance information. Steve commented that he was amazed at what great lengths some people went to get an autograph. He drove on to Bill’s house, didn’t mention anything about the accident but suddenly felt tired so excused himself to take a nap. An hour or so later his son found him dead. The impact had ruptured a blood vessel in his chest which allowed the blood to

leak into the sack surrounding his heart…causing his death. It was a great shock to all since he of all people had been most alive.

The entertainment community mourned. He had introduced and facilitated the ongoing careers of dozens of comics and singers and acrobats and actors. He had the knack of making them shine. And they were grateful. He made sure that every time he performed the contract demanded that his introduction include mention of all his talents—writing, composing, producing, acting and so on. This gave him the opportunity during the interview to be modest about them. He drove many of his colleagues' crazy when their programming plans were trashed by his incessant spontaneous eruptions. His books did not sell well. But we can remember his musical contributions. And he was the originator and shaper of the Tonight Show. All of his successors have given him credit for that. Spontaneous incessant eruptions poured from his mouth and we couldn't help but laugh. A silly remark here, a high giggle there, a dissonant piano chord mixed in, an occasional smart remark made us think. Shmock Shmock.