

## Eddie and Tex Go to the Show

by Elaine Loeser

“How’d you do?” Tex Petrovich asked Eddie Brandt as they milled in front of the peeling green door of the River Grove grammar school in the late Fall of 1932. Eddie put on his crooked grin and used his best ‘now you see them, now you don’t’ style to flash two shinny pennies in front of Tex’s nose. “You?” Eddie asked. Tex pulled his pockets inside-out empty. That Eddie was a real operator. Middle of the Depression and he could charm pennies out of the pockets of total strangers on his way to school. “Look sharp,” Eddie grinned as he sent a copper coin flipping into the air. Tex caught the coin and looked shame-faced at Eddie. But before Tex could say thanks or offer to return the coin, Eddie stuck a bony elbow in his ribs. “Forget it,” Eddie said. “What should I – go to the movies by my lonesome? What fun is that?”

They were partners, Eddie and Tex. Just like Gene Autry and Smiley Burnette were partners. Or Abbot and Costello. Holmes and Watson. Laurel and Hardy. Roy and Dale. Well, actually not like Roy and Dale, because Dale was a girl. But you get the idea. Eddie and Tex were movie partners. The boys were inseparable in their devotion to the perils and predicaments their movie idols got into every Saturday afternoon at the Elm Theater in downtown River Grove, Illinois. Stories about men who fought for justice against all odds. Men, like Gene and Roy and the great John Wayne, who conquered the wild West, tamed the horses, avoided the tender traps set by women (if they were smart), fought for law and order, plugged the bad guys when necessary, panned for gold, then gave it away to the widows and orphans of the new frontier.

And there were men like Flash Gordon who explored the unknown reaches of outer space to make it safe and law abiding for the Trekkies who would come later, and especially for two boys from River Grove who would undoubtedly follow.

There were men like Tarzan who knew from the purity of man's human instinct the fine line between good and evil and who kept the jungles safe from the evils of organized society. And men like the Three Stooges and the Marx Brothers who understood that zaniness is everywhere loose in the world and ripe for the picking by anybody with a nickel in his pocket for a ticket to the movies and the right general attitude about life. And on Saturday afternoons, Eddie and Tex had the nickel and the right attitude, you bet. These boys were born and bred for movie magic.

When they were fourteen and too big anymore to be swinging on vines in the woods around River Grove, Eddie and Tex took off for California to be singing cowboys in the movies. All they needed they reckoned were a couple of duffel bags filled with clean underwear, a beat-up guitar and two voices primed by hormonal changes for the exact twang popularized by yodeling cowpokes. Thirty miles outside of Chicago, in Joliet Illinois (famous, by the way, for notorious movie inmates like Edward G. Robinson and George Raft), they were picked up with their thumbs out by the local constabulary. The boys gave name, rank and serial number, but the coppers foiled the scheme and rang up Eddie's father who came down and drove them home like a couple of Bowery Boys collared in yet another half-baked plan by the kindly Father O'Malley. Eddie's father wasn't as square about the whole adventure as Father O'Malley often was, though. "Stick around a couple years till you finish school", he said, "then you want to take off for California, you got my blessing."

But when Eddie finished high school in 1941, he needed more than his father's blessing. He needed Uncle Sam's blessing as well. The war came along and substituted real life danger for the movie kind and broke up the River Grove Roustabouts for good. Eddie went into the Navy and Tex went into the Army, and just

to prove how time and service to one's country can change things, Eddie developed a crush on Betty Grable. Tex would have laughed to see that, because it never failed that Eddie could be persuaded to go get popcorn as soon as the mushy love stuff came on the screen. Eddie always swore they put Dale Evans in the Roy Rogers pictures to increase popcorn and candy sales. What other reason could there have been? You had to get up pretty early to put one over on Eddie Brandt.

In the Navy, Eddie traded in his six gun and guitar for radar equipment and a band leader's baton and crooned his way into the hearts and minds of his fellow soldiers. After that, the road to Hollywood was swept clear of obstacles, and in 1945 Eddie Brandt got off the Greyhound Bus at Sunset and Vine, made his way to Grauman's Egyptian Theater and worked his way up to assistant manager of the movie house. Forty bucks a week and movies to devour for breakfast, lunch and dinner. What more could a young man from River Grove want?

A pretty usherette introduced him to Spike Jones and Eddie became a "bandboy" for Spike's funny big band. He was band boy/writer, that is. In fact, everybody in the organization who breathed and had even a faint pulse was a writer for Spike: the seamstress, the janitor, the drummer, Spike's dog, you name it. And everybody who wasn't writing at the moment was a critic. There was a lot of confusion in showbusiness, Eddie was learning. Everybody was right and everybody was wrong. And everybody had an opinion. But our boy Eddie was a real humorist and it took a lot to confuse him, so pretty soon Spike made him the head writer of the act. Eddie Brandt had arrived.

So it was about time to grow up, Eddie thought. Time to put Gene and Roy and Stan and Ollie and all the rest of those great make-believe guys in the trunk of youthful dreams for good. He didn't need to dream anymore, he thought. Now he had the real thing, that illusive and long-dreamed of thing – a creative life in Hollywood.

And so it was for twenty years. And they weren't bad years. Not at all. Eddie wrote radio jokes for Joan Davis who went on to star in the wacky small-screen comedy "I married Joan". He wrote material for Eddie Cantor who was trying to launch his daughter Marilyn with her own musical comedy act in Las Vegas. He looked at more blank pieces of paper than the entire population of River Grove had ever even seen, and he wrote words and music on every single one of them.

He wrote songs like the hit "Heaven Knows," and "None but the Lonely Heart" -- romantic songs that proved that the boy from River Grove was a romantic at heart after all. He wrote the plaintive "There's No Place Like Hawaii," just to prove that he had come a long way from the leafy forests of Illinois. He wrote sad songs: "I'm Drowning My Sorrows," and "Tears in Your Eyes," that proved he had known a broken heart as well. The movie business can do that to a man. But there were also songs that conjured River Grove high school days and the joys of being young and full of promise: "High School Romance", "Shortnin' Bread Rock" and "Rock and Roll Wedding". Eddie was a songwriter. And a good one.

He wrote for early television shows like The Colgate Comedy Hour and worked as a cartoonist for Beany and Cecil. He wrote songs for the shows as well, and even provided some of the voices. He also worked for Hanna-Barbera and was credited with the characters Frankenstein Jr., the Impossible Moby Dick, and Mighty Mightor and the Cattanooga Cats. Eddie Brandt was a man of many talents, all of which were grounded in his love for movies and the magic they created. That magic carried him through some tough times too.

Eddie kept writing until the very day he discovered that his creativity was gone. He found himself imitating what he saw and heard in other acts, just like everybody else in town. The freshness that had carried the original Eddie Brandt stamp on it was gone. He thought he'd become a derivative hack and it didn't feel good. It wasn't true to the River Grove dream. Tex would have hated it.

That was when Eddie started to notice a certain cruelty in the business too. Even though they were supposed to make people laugh, comedians themselves didn't laugh much. The material Eddie and others wrote for them got used up fast, too fast, and the comedians and stars always needed more – now. And as a writer got older, it got harder to come up with the funny, fresh material. The kid writers were everywhere, and faster on the draw. And the jokes got meaner. Nobody around him was laughing much anymore.

Eddie started to see how some of the old-timers were treated after they had spit out all the funny stuff they had in them. “Whipping boys” they were called. Guys with credits as long as Betty Grable’s legs, trying to pay this year’s bills with last year’s credits. They could teach Rodney Dangerfield a thing or two about not getting any respect. It wasn’t very funny either. This was a long, long way from the dusty roads of Eddie’s cowboy heroes. A long, long way. The business Eddie had loved was changing. So Eddie decided it was time for a change too. But to what? How? Where would he go next? Up until now, the path had been clear. Hollywood or bust. For the first time, bust seemed possible.

But when your destiny is inscribed on your heart as Eddie Brandt’s was, finding the right road at a fork comes naturally. So when Eddie bought a run-down second hand furniture store in North Hollywood, it might have looked like he’d made a big mistake – but not really. The smartest thing he ever did, in fact was buying that store.

The shop was located in a working-class outpost in the San Fernando Valley, just over the big hill from the Hollywood sign and the star-studded streets of Hollywood and Vine. It was right across the street from the Debby Reynolds dance studio where little girls swayed in the fading afterglow of the former darling of song and dance. The store was a mess, with holes in the plaster that looked like Edward G. Robinson and the boys had tried to blast an escape out of the place with TNT. That gave Eddie an idea. He got out his old trunk of movie junk and sure enough, there was a great poster of Jimmy Cagney, surrounded by G-

men with big sliver tommy guns at the ready. Eddie tacked the movie cards and posters up over the holes in the walls of his shop and tried to sell old furniture. But all anybody wanted to buy was the old movie posters. This caused a big dilemma. Eddie loved those posters and all the hard-bitten, beautiful faces on them. These were the treasures of his youth, the very stuff that made him who he was. How could he sell them even for the big bucks people were offering?

But little by little he did sell them to people with B-movie souls, good-guy western souls, jungle-boy souls, pushing up out of the hot concrete of modern times in North Hollywood. And there were more of them than he had hoped to find. And Eddie Brandt, with his collection of boyhood treasures, was their John Beresford Tipton – the man who could make them spiritual millionaires. Some pretty big names came into the shop. Some of the faces on the posters were walking in the door to browse and schmooze and buy. Directors, editors, casting directors, costumers, film historians. Eddie was one of these guys for real now, just by being himself. Thus was born Eddie Brandt's Saturday Matinee, a one-of-a kind shop of b-movie magic and legend.

Eddie found his true calling scouring all of Los Angeles for B-movie memorabilia – a sort of Robin Hood of films, buying B-movie material from the A-movie rich, and redistributing it to the people who still believed in truth, justice and the American way. He set up a screening room of sorts: a hole cut in the ceiling of the warehouse to show his movies to the loyal fans who came to realize that the b-movie is really just a great film that somehow got stuck in movie hell. In Eddie's view, all of them started out with great expectations, and somehow ended with more heart than brains. The good intentions of the creative team are part of the charm. The fact that they failed is not always a bad thing. There were donuts every Saturday morning, and film fests on Saturday nights: Charlie Chan mysteries, John Ford stagecoach westerns, the Bowery Boys lower East side misadventures, musicals, melodramas, every kind of b-film ever made. Later, there were movies actually filmed at the store because of the authentic noir

atmosphere that pervaded. The vaunted AFI brought new generations of film makers to the store to see how it had been done – to learn and appreciate the history of the magic.

In time, and aided by the technology of video recorders, Eddie started to collect inventory of the films themselves. Of course Roy Rogers and Gene Autry were also television stars, so Eddie collected a lot of vintage television shows too. And like his posters and lobby cards, and other movie paraphernalia, he shared his film library with his customers. Without realizing it, he started the first video rental businesses in the country, and in the 80's had the vision to let everybody in the country browse his treasure trove in North Hollywood, almost as if they were down the street instead of in El Paso, Texas or De Moines, Iowa or River Grove, Illinois. He went national with his B-movie and vintage television sales through catalogues.

Some people might think Eddie Brandt had come a long way from bumming pennies in River Grove to go to a Saturday matinee with Tex. But Eddie didn't think so. The old Elm Theater was just a state of mind to Eddie and his friends. Every time the lights go down and the credits roll out those great names that dissolve into a cloud of dust, billowing up under horses' hooves and wagon wheels, Eddie and his customers return to the thrilling days of yesteryear and the Lone Ranger really does ride again. And when that inevitable question is heard: "Gosh, Paw, who was that masked man?" the name Eddie Brandt just might come to mind.

As with all really good stories, the end is imprinted right there at the beginning. And so it was with Eddie Brandt. Eddie died with his boots on in 2011, resting peacefully in Forest Lawn, the neighborhood where most of his movie idols and pals recline as well. His wife and son carried on the business until the pandemic put its big ugly mask on life and the doors were closed. The warehouse still contains mountains of memorabilia from the golden age of Hollywood, the time when dreams charted young lives and even managed to come true. Eddie's story is an American story. He was a hero in his own right – true to himself, of service to his country, devoted to his family and friends, carrying joy and fun and the American

way in his pocket along with those pennies from the Depression. Eddie Brandt's Saturday Movie Matinee lives on.