



**BILL THOMPSON**  
1931-2014

Honored as a Historymaker 1992  
Creator & Performer for  
Longest Running Children's TV Show  
Wallace & Ladmo



The following is an oral history interview with Bill Thompson (**BT**) conducted by Ben Tyler (**I**) for the Wallace and Ladmo exhibit at the Arizona Historical Society at Papago Park on January 10, 2002.

*Transcripts for website edited by members of Historical League, Inc.  
Original tapes are in the collection of the Arizona Heritage Center Archives, an Historical Society  
Museum, Tempe, Arizona.*

**I:** Well, it is January 10, 2002. And I am speaking with Bill Thompson a.k.a. Wallace of The Wallace and Ladmo Show. How you doing?

**BT:** Good. Pretty good.

**I:** I just want to talk about some of your background briefly. Some of the things with the show. Tell me about some of your background, where you came from. A little bit of what your childhood was like. Where were you born?

**BT:** New York City.

**I:** Uh-hmm. And you grew up?

**BT:** In a little town north of New York City called Bronx Hill in Westchester County.

**I:** Okay. And what was that like?

**BT:** It was nice. Very green. Very nice. A nice place to grow up.

**I:** Were you a good student? Did you enjoy school?

**BT:** loved school.



**I:** Yeah?

**BT:** I wasn't a good student.

**I:** Yeah. <laughs> I can identify with that.

**BT:** Except if it was a course I liked. Like history. Or any of the writing courses. Or performing.

**I:** What did your family do?

**BT:** They both came from mining families. Both my mother and father were miners. They were down in the mines. <laughs>

**I:** I assume that they were adults when you were conceived. I'm sorry. That was really awful.

**BT:** Yeah. <laughs>

**I:** Your family came from the mining industry.

**BT:** Right. <laughs> And a lot of it's out here, too. The, the Inspiration Mine. Magma. And Newmont.

**I:** Did that have anything to do with you winding up in Arizona?

**BT:** Yes, because my grandparents lived out here. I used to come up here in the forties. Actually, in the thirties, I remember coming out.

**I:** Now there is a relatively famous Arizonan that you are related to. Colonel Boyce Thompson. Is that correct?

**BT:** Yes. That's my grandfather's brother.

**I:** Which would be your great-uncle.

**BT:** Right. Those were his mines.

**I:** Did you know him very well? Did you ever spend any time with him?

**BT:** He died a week before I was born.

**I:** Really?



**BT:** Yeah.

**I:** That sounds like something you'd make up. That's why I was saying, "Really?" You have that grin on your face. I can usually tell when you're not being totally square. Did he really die a week before you were born?

**BT:** Just about.

**I:** I see.

**BT:** Ben, nobody's gonna care about any of this. <laughs>

**I:** Well, knock it off. Just let me go about this, okay?

**BT:** No, actually, I think you're a very good interviewer.

**I:** Well, thanks. I appreciate that. It's not my primary employment, but I'm learning. I thought that Boyce would be relatively interesting to some other people who are studying Arizona history to know that you guys are from the same family.

**BT:** Well, you know what he did with his mining money? One of the things he did? He established a zoo for plants.

**I:** That would be an arboretum, wouldn't it?

**BT:** That's right. The Boyce Thompson Arboretum up there in Superior.

**I:** That is a famous arboretum world-wide.

**BT:** Right. Things are now really getting incredibly boring.

**I:** Now, tell me how you wound up in Arizona.

**BT:** I always came out in the summers. I liked the place. And I just decided this is where I wanted to live.

**I:** Let me be more specific. How did you end up at KPHO?

**BT:** I wanted to get into television. And I worked for a couple of years at the R & G.

**I:** That would be the Republican Gazette?



**BT:** Right. And I kept going over to KPHO begging for a job. Any job. Gimme a broom. So, they finally hired me at the end of '53. I was four hours a day in the art department. And four hours a day on the studio crew. I was an art major in college.

**I:** So your first job at KPHO was?

**BT:** Floor Man and Assistant Artist.

**I:** And then you progressed up the ladder? How did you get from the time you started to, let's say, the Gold Dust Charlie Show?

**BT:** Oh, I was there a couple of months and I was watching Ken Kennedy do the kid's show.

**I:** Now, Ken Kennedy was the actor who played Gold Dust Charlie.

**BT:** That's what I wanted to do. I wanted to be on a show like that. I kept asking them and asking them. Then, finally, he says, "All right, stop bothering me. You can be on." And I had a character developed. The Wallace Sneed character. I used to write about him in high school and college.

**I:** And what was his last name?

**BT:** Sneed.

**I:** Because eventually you just became Wallace?

**BT:** Yeah.

**I:** Tell me about that character.

**BT:** Well, I knew what he looked like. I knew what he did. He was kind of a jerk, which was not a stretch for me.

**I:** I see.

**BT:** And I got a job being Gold Dust Charlie's errand boy. Taking groceries out to the customers. Bob Martin. Dick Rawls. They liked it. They were management at Channel 5. They just gave me my own show. A spin-off. Off of Gold Dust.

**I:** That first show was called?



**BT:** It's Wallace?

**I:** With a question mark.

**BT:** Right.

**I:** On the end.

**BT:** Yeah.

**I:** When you first started doing It's Wallace?; give me a description of what that show was like.

**BT:** They said, "All right, you got Tuesday and Thursday evenings between the news and the first movie. 6:30 to 7:00 at night. The whole studio is yours. You can do whatever you want." No sets.

**I:** No budget?

**BT:** <laughs> No. And it was just me running around, up in the rafters where the lights and the ladders were, breaking stuff and getting in trouble.

**I:** Did you have any cartoons to run then or was it just you for a half hour?

**BT:** Crazy Cat and Scrappy.

**I:** Boy, I remember those.

**BT:** Yeah. And then, it just went from there. After about a year, Lad joined the show and then another five years, McMahan joined the show.

**I:** Tell me about how you first met Lad.

**BT:** He was one of the cameramen. Funny guy. And you run out of one-man bits real quick. And Lad was perfect.

**I:** Do you remember the first bit you did with him?

**BT:** Yeah. It was the Congressional Medal of Honor bit.

**I:** Tell us about the Congressional Medal of Honor bit.



**BT:** I said, "Hey Lad, what are you doing?" He says, "I lost my Congressional Medal of Honor out in the hallway." And I said, "So why you looking for it in here?" He says, "The light's better in here."

**I:** <laughs> Okay. Now, I had heard stories about him being a cameraman and on the show at the same time. Can you tell me how that worked?

**BT:** He would just walk off. You know, he would set his camera and just run around in the front, do something and then he'd run back.

**I:** Run back around behind the camera?

**BT:** Right. He'd set it on a long shot, you know, and then run around.

**I:** How long did you guys continue to do it that way before he actually became a full time partner?

**BT:** Listen, I think the minute Lad walked on, I had a partner.

**I:** Well, sure. But when, let me put it this way. When did he stop being a cameraman?

**BT:** Oh, that wasn't until years later. There came a time, very shortly, when he was working on the show with me every day, but he still had a shift as a cameraman at night.

**I:** How long was he a cameraman on the Wallace Show and appearing on the show?

**BT:** Only a few months.

**I:** Only a few months. And so that was sort of a natural fit for you guys, huh?

**BT:** A really great guy. I miss him.

**I:** A lot of us do. Now, let's talk about when Pat showed up. Pat McMahan. Now, he was originally hired at the station to do what?

**BT:** Everything.

**I:** I guess no one had just one job back then, right?

**BT:** Right. He was the news man, weather man, sports man. He was the weekend relief booth announcer.

**I:** But he wasn't hired to work for the It's Wallace Show?



**BT:** No.

**I:** He was hired as a news man.

**BT:** And to do commercials.

**I:** Yeah, okay.

**BT:** And then one day he's sitting at the back of studio. And Lad and I discovered we had a three-man bit.

**I:** I think you described this for me one time before, but if you could for the tape here. The first bit that McMahon did on the show.

**BT:** Yes. He came on as a guy who was in charge of an anti-littering campaign. And he said, "Here, we have an ad in the paper." And he couldn't find it. And he kept crumpling up the newspaper and throwing it all over the studio, trying to find this ad. Of course, the place was a mess.

**I:** <laughs>

**BT:** So we asked him back the next day.

**I:** That's great. People who know the show, when they think about McMahon, and they think about it, and of course, he did all those characters on the show, but I think probably the first one that comes to mind, is Gerald. Now, Gerald was a character that you originally thought of for McMahon, right?

**BT:** The first character that he did was his own, Aunt Maud.

**I:** Okay.

**BT:** That was in '62. He had done one-shots for a long time. No, '60, '61. But then the first one...

**I:** But those weren't recurring characters?

**BT:** No.

**I:** They were just one-shot guys that came and went.

**BT:** Right.

**I:** Okay.

**BT:** He did Aunt Maud. He came up with the name, the costume, the voice, the whole thing.



**I:** Uh-hmm. But getting to Gerald...

**BT:** Yeah.

**I:** That was a character you developed for him.

**BT:** Well, I would say it was more of collaboration.

**I:** I know how that works.

**BT:** Even Ladmo.

**I:** I'm not asking you to take credit for anything that Pat did, but I appreciate the fact that you're being modest here. But, the spoiled, rich brat. Was that a character that you came up with?

**BT:** I think it was me when I was a kid.

**I:** <laughs>

**BT:** Ben, I'm serious.

**I:** So, did you see yourself as a spoiled, rich kid?

**BT:** No, no, no. We were middle class.

**I:** Okay.

**BT:** Some of the relatives had a little money.

**I:** I see.

**BT:** Yeah.

**I:** Well, then why do you say that was you?

**BT:** I don't know. I thought it was funny at the moment.

**I:** <laughs> Okay. So, attempting to whack our way through some of the BS here.

**BT:** <laughs>



**I:** The character of Gerald. Where did it come from?

**BT:** I just thought it would be funny to have a kid on the show whose uncle owned the station and we couldn't do anything about it. The General Manager wanted his nephew on the show whether we liked it or not.

**I:** And what was the initial response from your audience, your viewing audience to Gerald?

**BT:** They hated him. They really disliked him. And it got dangerous. He was attacked on stage. They took a gun away from somebody at Legend City. It was aiming at him. They all ran up on the stage at Papago Park. His first personal appearance.

**I:** That was the opening of Papago Plaza, right?

**BT:** Papago Plaza and...

**I:** Tell us about that little incident at Papago Plaza.

**BT:** First, they started with throwing things. Then, they stormed the stage. The stage collapsed. We had to block him in the pickup truck that we came out there in. And they were screaming. It got violent. We broke down in tears cause we were laughing so hard.

**I:** <laughs> Did Pat ever get actually physically injured in any of those personal appearances?

**BT:** He got shoved around a lot.

**I:** Yeah. Nothing worse than that?

**BT:** Right. But then we had to have security for him. One cop on each side. Then, of course, he'd read his rules: "Don't touch me. Don't come within ten feet of me. I don't want your cooties on me." Just things to endear himself to the audience.

**I:** <laughs> That's great. Well, let me ask you a couple of questions that aren't so much the nuts and bolts of the show. Just personal things, if that's okay.

**BT:** Okay.

**I:** Thirty.six years of doing the TV show...

**BT:** Yes.



**I:** You know, I worked for the show for a very short period of time. I came in when you guys had been doing it about thirty.

**BT:** That's where I've seen you before.

**I:** And when I came in, I think what I was most struck by initially, was you guys loved what you did. I really got the impression that there was no bum out. That you guys seemed happy and enjoyed what you were doing.

**BT:** That's true.

**I:** Was that a fair assessment? At the thirty year mark?

**BT:** Yes. Lots. Of. Fun.

**I:** Yes. Most people don't hold a job for that many years, let alone a TV show.

**BT:** And you're working with a couple of talented guys.

**I:** Ummhumm

**BT:** And ratings are up and we had a full load of sponsors. The kids would show up to personal appearances. It was good. Nobody has ever grasped the reality of exactly how trivial it was.

**I:** Help us grasp that.

**BT:** When the history of television is written, it won't even make a footnote. I thought it was really trivial. And this business about the museum putting on an exhibit, this is a departure for them. They usually have exhibits about important people doing important things. I mean, this is ridiculous.

**I:** They must have been hammered when they made you guys history-makers. I don't know what they were thinking.

**BT:** <laughs>

**I:** The first year you came on with Sandra Day O'Connor and Barry Goldwater, I think, in that first year. So you must have had an effect on somebody. When the show went off the air, what was that like? Give me the reader's digest version of how it was you came to a realization yourself that you wanted to stop doing the show. You told me that you went to management and spoke to them and said, "I've had enough."

**BT:** Well, that isn't exactly what I said.



**I:** Well, would you mind sharing that with us? If you don't want to talk about it, we don't have to, but...

**BT:** I felt that after thirty-six years, whatever we had started out to do, we had done it. And it was time to move on. You know, leave while it's still good. Why? I know other guys that just hung around too long. And just beat it into the ground. Like this exhibit and those plays. They're just beating a dead horse. Ah, ah!

**I:** It's audio. They can't see you having a heart attack.

**BT:** Oh, okay.

**I:** But it's very amusing.

<both laughing>

**I:** What was it, do you think, that made the show run thirty-six years? Because this show lasted well past the life expectancy of most TV programs and well past the point that any TV stations were producing their own local kids' TV show.

**BT:** Right.

**I:** So what do you think it was, what was the secret of Wallace and Ladmo that made it so endearing and last so long?

**BT:** I think it kept on being funny. You know, we were still laughing at the end. And if the people were laughing, that's good.

**I:** I don't want to put words in your mouth or anything like that, because I had my own inclination, my own notion of why it did.

**BT:** You mean dedication and discipline?

**I:** No. I'm talking about the chemistry between the three of you guys. Because you and Pat and Lad were so extraordinarily different from each other.

**BT:** Yeah.

**I:** You came from such diverse backgrounds.

**BT:** Yeah.



**I:** And always seemed to get along while you were doing the show.

**BT:** Yeah. Well, each guy brought something. My job was to write and produce. Lad's job, he was the heart and soul of the show. Everybody liked him. And McMahon was the only really talented guy. I mean, doing all those different characters. So you had, nobody was stepping on anybody else's toes or territory. Each guy had something different to bring. And we enjoyed doing it. It was a lot of fun. They even paid us, which I think is incredible.

**I:** Did you have a philosophy, for lack of a better term, of how to approach a gag, or a bit or a sketch for a kids' show?

**BT:** Yes. Never, ever talk down to a kid. Make sure it's funny. And the big test is if it's funny, is if you laugh when you write it and you know that. Don't be concerned with what other people say. If you feel it's funny, it will probably work for the kids.

**I:** Can you expand on that a little? Say someone has never seen the show before.

**BT:** Yes.

**I:** With what you just said in mind; don't talk down to the kids, etc. How would you utilize that within a sketch? I'll give you an example. When Aunt Maud first came on the show, she wasn't doing the story book right away.

**BT:** No.

**I:** She was an old lady, lived in Sun City, and rode a Honda and that sort of thing. But then she started bringing the story book out.

**BT:** Uh-hum.

**I:** When she did that, the stories were not what you would normally expect a kid's story to be.

**BT:** No. Terrible things happened. You had those horrible endings.

**I:** That had to come from you. That just had your sense of humor stamped all over it to me.

**BT:** Horrible and terrible is funny.

<both laughing>



**BT:** I know, yeah, what you're talking about.

**I:** Was there, when you were writing those stories about Aunt Maud, was there any sort of template that you used? Did you have any kind of philosophy or template for that?

**BT:** That they don't be too long.

**I:** Yeah?

**BT:** Fairly short. All of it started out like it sounded like a real story for kids, out of a story book. Then all of a sudden, things started happening. The lady leaves her family. She's tired of the housework and she goes to Vegas. She's never heard from again.

**I:** <laughs>

**BT:** I just wanted it to be funny.

**I:** Listen, I'm going to wrap this up. But, I want to give you the last word. If you were describing the Wallace and Ladmo show to someone who had never seen it before, what would be your description?

**BT:** Really dumb. Absolutely moronic, silly show that was so much fun to do that we kept doing it.

**I:** So fun and dumb. Or dumb and fun.

**BT:** Ben, I predict a really good future for you. You're going to go on, writing plays...

**I:** Jesus Christ.

**BT:** You're going to make movies, Ben. I know it.

**I:** Well, that's great. I appreciate that.

**BT:** How did it all start?

**I:** Well, I wish you're great uncle had been a movie mogul. Maybe I would be. So anything you want to say in closing? The Wallace and Ladmo, anything about it?

**BT:** Just one thing.

**I:** Okay.

**BT:** Good bye now.

