

Coast Defenders: Vaudeville & Vaudevillians in New England

Program length: One hour

Optional: Combine this program with the one-hour “Vaudeville Retrospective” to create a custom two-hour presentation.

Description: This program looks beyond the big business of big-time Vaudeville and the lives of its well-known personalities to explore the stories of small-time Vaudeville theatres and performers across New England’s smaller cities and towns.

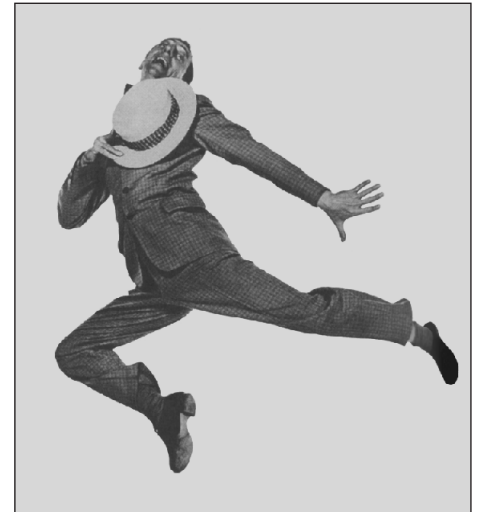
Advances in communication and transportation facilitated the development of vast networks of Vaudeville theatres across the

continent. Yet there were performers, either because of their third-tier talent, family commitments, or personal preference, did not achieve the prestige – or seek the grind – of a 40-week national tour. In New England, these performers were known as “coast defenders” – they worked up, down, and through New England from Bridgeport to Bangor, working only regional circuits of smaller theatres.

Vaudeville historian Frank Cullen, in his magisterial work, *Vaudeville Old and New*, writes that the term “coast defender” was adapted from military terminology, i.e. those who never shipped out but were assigned to guard local populations. “Applied to showbusiness, it was faintly derogatory, implying fair to poor acts that probably could not make the grade nationally. However, there were some good acts who made the choice to stay close to home base despite national potential.”

New England was the origin of many a big-time Vaudeville star, however, and this program also follows the stories of those performers from small-time hometown beginnings to the bright lights of the major circuits.

About the Presenter: R.W. Bacon is an all-but-retired acrobatic juggler, jazz banjoist, and comic dancer – and a nowhere-near-retired historian and museum professional. His father was a sleight-of-hand magician, and later, and escape artist in the style of Houdini. His grandmother was a silent moviehouse pianist and music director. About 30 years ago his grandfather put him on the trail of



Ray Bolger (1904-1987), born Raymond Wallace Bulcao in Dorchester, Mass., made the jump from small-time to big-time Vaudeville in the 1920s, then to Broadway shows in the 1930s. His portrayal of the Scarecrow in *The Wizard of Oz* made him into a beloved showbusiness icon.

cousin Fred Bacon, half of “Leroy & Appleton,” a comedy acrobatic team that went from “coast defender” to the big-time and back again in the early 20th century. ■



Fred Allen (1894-1956), born John F. Sullivan in Cambridge, Mass., began in small-time Vaudeville as a juggler, but his comedy monologues made him a headliner on Broadway, radio, & TV.



Fred Allen was also an outstanding writer. His book, *Much Ado About Me*, about his early life and career, stands as the finest, most insightful account of life in small-time Vaudeville, and this program draws heavily on its content. His later book on his career in radio & TV: *Treadmill to Oblivion*.



Bill Moran, from Lawrence, Mass., was a juggler known for his skill with “boomerang straw hats.” His career spanned over 50 years, including small-time & big-time Vaudeville and Broadway revues. In his later years he performed at Canobie Lake Park in Salem, N.H., just a few miles from his hometown.