

# BEHIND 'A CHRISTMAS STORY'

*Shepherd's engineer recalls roots of holiday classic*

## RADIO SOMEWHERE

By **MAUREEN NEVIN DUFFY**  
Correspondent

Getting through the holiday season on radio is like trying to play opposite a child star — sooner or later, the kid takes over and you've lost control of the show. Holiday music can take over, too. It's like prunes; is one enough? Are two too many?

We're giddily nostalgic each season when we hear that first broadcast of Bing Crosby singing "White Christmas." If it's starting to flurry when you hear it, all the better.

But inevitably, the shopping, cooking, the music, the wrapping and the cleaning mount to a crescendo as you rush out your back door in your slippers to stash the Christmas paper scraps in the trash, and something shimmering below catches your eye as you are suddenly airborne. And before you can grab the railing you realize a) this is going hurt like nothing you've ever done to yourself before and b) this has to be the 50th time you've heard the song about the lady who ran out of cranberry sauce on Christmas Eve.

But such mishaps are the kind of grist Jean Shepherd, the late WOR-AM radio host and

the author of the perennial favorite holiday movie "A Christmas Story," would've spun out a whole Christmas night with.

His sound engineer of 10 years, Herb Squire, agrees.

Squire, who these days makes his home with wife, Laurie, a columnist and former WOR producer, in Martinsville, recently explained how the bard of late-night radio made it through the dread season.

"Most everything was unscripted," he said. "I'd mention something to Jean in the 10 minutes before airtime and, amazingly, he'd weave it into a whole show that very night."

Squire, who still is in the business as vice president of engineering for the Somerset-based DSI RF Systems, says "A Christmas Story" actually was drawn from the bits Shepherd did on the air. But the movie couldn't compare with the pieces Shepherd spun from his youth in Indiana to WOR radio in New York, says Squire. Nothing could match the intimacy of those spontaneous combinations of memory and talent delivered in Shepherd's classic narrative style, he says.

"I was the audience," says Squire, who also kept Shepherd going with his own antics in the studio and provided sound effects. "It was only the two of us there. You have to have someone there to react when you're a one-man show. But it was fun. I loved listening.

"One Christmas night, Jean dragged in an old radio loud speaker a friend had given him. I hooked it up to feed Jean's voice through it with all the distortion and fuzzy sounds. Jean ran with it live, started talking like an old-time announcer. It was an effortless free-flow performance.

"Jean narrated the movie," adds Squire. "And that was him in line at the store filled with Christmas shoppers. Remember the kid goes to get on line and the tall guy says, 'Hey kid, this ain't the end of the line?' And sure enough, the line goes all around the darn store. That was Jean's cameo role. The movie was all snippets of pieces Jean did over the air: New Year's Eve experiences, duck hunting, you name it — a little bit from this one, a little from that strung together."

Squire says it was Jean's wife, Leigh Brown, who encouraged him to write his books and pull the movie together after he'd left WOR.

We're glad she did. Those were great stories, and one heck of a way to get through the holiday on radio.

*Maureen Nevin Duffy hosted her own weekly public-affairs talk show over WYGG-FM (88.1) for more than six years. An independent journalist, she has written for newspapers and magazines for 30 years. She lives in Asbury Park. Write her at [AsburyRadio@aol.com](mailto:AsburyRadio@aol.com).*