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## Theatre of the mind: an Experiment in Modern American Audio Fiction

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THEATRE OF THE MIND: AN EXPERIMENT IN MODERN AMERICAN AUDIO  
FICTION

by

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Submitted in Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements of the  
Senior Scholars' Program

COLBY COLLEGE  
1993

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This project involved the creation of more than five hours of audio fiction, most of which is in the form of sketch comedy. The first segment of this paper, "Why a Senior Scholar Project in Radio Theatre," will lead the interested reader through my life, up to the decision to become a Senior Scholar at Colby. The second segment, entitled "The Project," details the work that went into the completion of this project. This segment is divided into "Semester One" and "Semester Two."

The real meat of the project is in the tapes themselves. The first five tapes are Gale Force Theatre. These are nine, half-hour sketch comedy shows, recorded in an eight-track studio. I wrote one quarter of these sketches myself, and produced and co-engineered the shows. Unfortunately, the recorded episodes included here are of a less "clean" quality than might be hoped, as they are often fifth generation recordings. On the fifth tape (side 10) I have included a few sketches which I wrote and helped produce and perform at WTOS. The sixth tape (sides 11 and 12) is my longer work, The Four Story Building, which consists of only two stories, and should be an extremely clean recording. All thanks to Colby College, Jim Boylan, and the Senior Scholars' Program.

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**UNEARTHING A LOST ART:  
MY EXPERIENCE, BASED ON MY SENIOR SCHOLAR YEAR AT COLBY  
by Thomas Gerencer**

**WHY A SENIOR SCHOLAR PROJECT IN RADIO THEATRE?**

One year ago, I submitted a project proposal to Colby's Senior Scholar Committee. This proposal stated that I would write and produce a large amount of modern American radio theatre, and that I would gain an understanding of the medium that no American had ever had. Colby's Senior Scholar Program has allowed me to reach these goals, and to pursue study in a field which has become my calling in life; not limited to radio theatre, but encompassing all of audio fiction (meaning any story meant to be heard). The following is an explanation of the events that led up to my decision to begin this varied and wonderful project, which has helped me choose what I will do with the rest of my life.

I got into radio and audio theatre because all my life I have wanted to be a writer. In the fourth grade, I used to write chapters in a story called "The Stranger:" the continuing story of a group of fourth graders and a short guy who wore a 1930's "newsboy" type cap and (for no good reason) spied on them around corners. Later, I wrote the first eight pages in a novel called King, about a giant snapping turtle that ate four characters resembling my closest friends, one of them for littering. I continued to write short pieces like this until my senior year in high-school, when I entered the Waterville High School Gifted and Talented Creative Writing Program. There, I was told that my writing was "escapist and silly." I was encouraged to write about more serious, personal topics like sailing and snow and, on one occasion, monks.

When I enrolled at UMaine in 1987, I decided I would have to have a practical career, and that I could write "on the side." I therefore declared Physics as my major, satiating my creative appetite with the consolation that, someday, I would invent time travel. Instead, they taught me Calculus and vectors. I withdrew from Freshman Physics with a passing grade, wrangled out of my professor with the promise that I would never attempt to study

Physics again. Meanwhile, I was skipped over the introductory creative writing course at UMaine, and put into Sanford Phippen's junior level class. I flourished under him, as he let me write about robots and time travel and dead people (in short, whatever I wanted) with a minimum of disapproval.

Still, though, I had to have a practical career. So I went into accounting. At first I did well, taking on the basic concepts with ease and enthusiasm. I got a perfect "4.0" in my first semester. Later, they taught me business law and management and tax accounting, which I found to be more than marginally less interesting. Halfway through my senior year, I dropped out of UMaine altogether, abandoning the concept of a practical career. I would make my way in the world as a writer. This was a major turning point in my life. I decided that no matter how tough it was, no matter how long it took me, no matter if I died without success, I would devote the rest of my life to writing. I spent the next few months waiting tables, paying bills, and writing every day.

My writing improved considerably. The summer I was supposed to have graduated, I wrote a story I was very proud of. It was called "This Can't Be Happening," and it was about a young man who realizes he is nothing more than the main character of a short story.<sup>1</sup> I had decided to send the story off to a few magazines, to try to make some money at my chosen trade. In speaking with a friend of mine (who, incidentally, had just completed an accounting degree) I learned something that made me reconsider the benefits of a college education. He said that he had an uncle who was a magazine publisher, and that his uncle had told him that most editors go through stacks of hundreds of stories, looking for one to publish. I had heard this before, but my friend added the news that having a college degree could make an editor look twice at a story they would otherwise have passed by. I began to think about completing my degree, and after a little thought, decided I could take some classes at Colby, which, after all, was right here in my hometown. That way, I could keep writing daily, while moving myself ever closer to graduate status.

As I worked out my continuing education strategy, another idea struck me. Colby College had a radio station. Radio was a way to reach large numbers of people. Why not read, or even perform, my stories over the airwaves?

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<sup>1</sup>This story was to become chapter four of my one hour audio story, The Four Story Building



After all, some of my heroes got their start writing for radio. The members of Monty Python, for instance, started out in such radio comedy shows as "I'm sorry, I'll Read that Again." Douglas Adams, who wrote my all time favorite book, The Hitch-Hiker's Guide to the Galaxy, originally wrote that science-fiction comedy as a radio script. I had listened to and enjoyed the results on NPR when I was fifteen. Also, Robert Sheckley, whose hilarious short stories had inspired me, got his start writing episodes of "X-1," the 1940's sci-fi program that had entertained me during my high-school years. Another attraction to radio theatre was that nobody seemed to be making any. It would be easy to get published, I thought, in a medium where you were the only one doing any work. While this turned out to be true, it also meant that there was nobody doing any publishing, and that I would have to learn; even re-invent the trade myself.

I enrolled in a creative writing course, and a Chaucer course, at Colby, and I went to the radio station to see if I could get on the air. I told the program director of my plans to write and air a radio serial, and was surprised at how quickly he agreed to give me a slot. But first, of course, I had to learn how to be a DJ. They put me in a training program which involved being an apprentice on another show--for an entire semester. This was The Floyd and Dudley Show, a music/sketch comedy program. I pulled records, filed records, and cued records. I did the same with CDs. I opened and closed doors on cue for sound effects, provided the odd character voice, and even wrote a sketch or two. I was struck with the difficulty presented by acting out even a simple, one page sketch over the radio. I noticed the complications involved in preparing sound effects, and in getting them to sound good, and making them happen on cue. All body language and facial expressions were lost. Ordinary sounds and voices became flat and two-dimensional. I wasn't pleased with the results of many of the sketches on this show, nor was I made hopeful about my own future in radio. In short, I knew I had a long way to go.

The next semester, I enrolled in two more English classes, and I got my own radio show. my plans to send my stories to publishers had been put on a back burner. I was now faced with the problem of writing and producing a multi-episodic radio serial. However, I did not know where to begin, and so I didn't. Instead, I played music, and occasionally read a short story over the air. Finally, half-way through the semester, I asked for help. Three or four co-students had expressed an interest in writing for radio. I called a meeting, and

three of them showed up. We discussed what we could do with my hour of air time, and eventually came up with the idea of writing and producing a half-hour sketch comedy show (which we decided to call The Merv Griffin Comedy Hour in the hopes that the familiarity of Merv's name would draw a listening audience). After one of our members dropped out, we became a team of three, with Patrick Robbins, Jon Zack, and me writing and producing a very mediocre show.

We were written up in the Morning Sentinel, and called "hilariously funny" by columnist Dan Austin, but I had a notion that this praise had more than a little to do with the fact that I was a personal friend of Dan's, and waited on him two days a week at The Last Unicorn. The truth was that we knew next to nothing about the art of recording, and were trying to record sophisticated scenes of sound using a cassette deck, a CD player, and one microphone. My Waterville friends, although polite, weren't interested in listening to the show for more than a few minutes. One night, we got a phone call from a "fan" who urged us to "stop putting that awful crap on the radio." After spending ten hours per week writing and producing that "awful crap," I was almost brought to tears, but I agreed with the man. The sounds were flat and unreal. There were loud clicks in between lines of stilted dialogue, and continuous hiss and hum filled the silences. I knew there had to be a better way to do what we were doing, and I knew that only time and perseverance would show me that way.

Towards the end of that semester, I was thinking of going back to UMaine full time. A professor of mine, Russel Potter, suggested I matriculate at Colby instead. He went through the specifics with me for hours, and when we were through talking, I was convinced that I could and would graduate from Colby in just one-and-a-half-years. I told my friends at The Merv Griffin Comedy Hour the good news, and they were excited. We made plans for improving the show in the fall, and for doing it as an independent study in creative writing. One of our members, Patrick Robbins, informed me that he had spoken to creative writing teacher Jim Boylan, and that Jim had expressed an interest in being our academic sponsor.

Summer came. I was accepted to the college. Later, I racked my brains over the problem of our mediocre radio work. I talked to Jim Boylan, who had done some work with radio during his college years. I told him we were having a hard time acting while recording music and sound effects, and that we



needed to be able to do each separately. Jim told me I might try removing the erase head on a cassette deck, thereby allowing us to record sound effects on top of dialogue without erasing the dialogue. That way, we could do all the acting first, and then go back and put sound effects on later. I tried this "bonehead method of recording," as he called it, and met with limited success. The sound effects always drowned out the voices, which became very muffled. I asked Professor Potter, my advisor, and Paul Gregoire, head of Colby's Audio-Visual department, about the possibilities for better sound layering, and came up with the solution of multi-tracking. Through multi-tracking, a tape can be divided into a number of "tracks," each of which can be recorded and played back separately or at the same time. This would allow the layering of sound, and the individual control of volume, so if a sound effect was too loud with respect to the voice, I would be able to turn it down and/or turn the voice up. After shopping in several music stores and checking "Uncle Henry's Weekly Swap-it or Sell-it Guide" for months, I bought a Yamaha MT-100 4-Track recorder for \$300.

In the fall, the three of us renamed our show "Gale Force Theatre," in deference to its new, revived prospects. Following Jim Boylan's suggestions, we took on a female member, Sarah Inman, to broaden our scope of input and appeal across gender barriers, as well as to avoid having to do awful falsettos all the time. We used more recurring characters, and were able to improve our production to the level where it "blew away" our old show. We would record the four voices on tracks one and two, and then I would go back later and "overdub" all the music by simply recording it onto track three. Later, I would add the ambient sound effects (like wind, fire, crowd noise, etc.), and punctual sound effects (which are short, punctuation-mark type sound effects like gunshots and doors closing). Finally, I would "mix the show down," which involved recording all four tracks to a conventional cassette format at reasonable relative levels. In the end, we managed to produce ten episodes of a fairly well done sketch comedy show. We got a few calls from genuine fans who loved what we were doing. Jim Boylan, our academic sponsor, praised us for our use of the medium. There were still problems, however. The voices were sometimes muffled. There was still a loud hum or hiss drowning out the other sounds. Sometimes the sound effects sounded phony or just plain wrong. Finally, the writing was just too corny and goofy, and we couldn't always get across what was supposed to be going on. My Waterville friends (whom I

regard as average American radio listeners) still would not tune in. There was something (or some things) missing, and we still had a long way to go.

I went to Jim Boylan to ask him if we could get credit for another semester, and he said "no way." He told me that he felt he had given radio theatre enough in the way of credit, but encouraged me to keep up the good work anyway. At this point, I was putting some twenty hours per week into the creation of my radio show. In my journal, I wrote, "I'm thinking of doing a six episode serial next semester, not for credit, just for fun." I thanked Jim for what help he had given us. If I really needed credit, I decided, I could go to the drama department. I left Jim's office and went on to produce our last three shows.

One of the things I have learned in the pursuit of radio theatre is that opportunity is always knocking, but that sometimes it sounds like someone goofing around outside. While waiting tables one day the previous semester, I was taking an order from a customer whose voice sounded familiar to me. Every time he spoke, I experienced strong *deja vu*. Finally, I asked him what he did for work.

"I'm in broadcasting," he replied. It turned out that he was Chuck Bell, alias Tom O, of the WTOS "Mountain Morning Show." I had listened to his show on and off for a few years up to that point. It was a professionally produced music and sketch comedy show. Once I'd told my brother that WTOS was the only station around that did anything approaching radio theatre. When I repeated this to Tom O, he thanked me and asked me if I was involved with radio theatre. I told him I was, and I described "The Merv Griffin Comedy Show," and he said he'd listen in sometime. He did, and he liked it, but I didn't find that out until about six months later.

During the first Gale Force Theatre semester, I met Tom O, of WTOS, again. He told me he had tuned in a few times, and really liked our show. He went on to ask about the possibility of getting some kind of intern from Colby to help with his own show. I told him I was interested in doing that myself, and I said I'd call him as soon as I found out if it was possible. I later found out that an internship was not practical for me, but an "apprenticeship" was. I was to work at WTOS as a part of my Senior Scholar Project.

The semester drew to a close. The members of Gale Force Theatre turned in their final tapes and journals. We all agreed that it had been a fun time, and well worth the effort. Then we got a surprise. Jim Boylan said he would give us

more college credit after all, if we wanted. Our last three tapes had made an impression on him. He told us that we had reached the threshold of art, and that to stop us now would be wrong. When the other three members said that they didn't need any more credit, having fulfilled their requirements and being only one semester away from graduation, Jim suggested that I apply to the Senior Scholars Program. I did, and I was accepted, and my Senior Scholar year, which ends in eight days, began.

## THE PROJECT

In the past year, under Colby College's Senior Scholar Program, I made considerable progress in "unearthing the lost art" of radio theatre. Along the way, I learned a great deal about radio and audio theatre and audio publishing, and about how radio theatre is something at once ancient and dead, and modern; yet to be born. Mostly, I learned about myself, and about what it takes to fulfill a long-term goal.

Before I take you, the reader, through my senior scholar year, I'd like to give you a snapshot of what I believe, at the end of my undergraduate education, to be the state of "American radio theatre." First, I believe that radio theatre is simply the logical extension of Homo Sapiens' age old desire to tell and listen to stories. It is a popular belief that, in the early days of our race, our distant ancestors sat around fires at night, telling and listening to fascinating stories and creation myths.<sup>2</sup> A very long time after, the written word was invented as a means of record keeping and, later, was used as a method of approximating the art of storytelling. The advantage was that the story, once written down, would remain the same, and could be experienced years later, or by large numbers of people at different times.

When Thomas Edison invented the first audio recording device,<sup>3</sup> he made possible a "freezing" and proliferation of the spoken word much the same as that enjoyed by words in print. People soon began to record stories. Authors like T.S. Eliot read their works into tape machines. Marconi (and/or Tesla)

<sup>2</sup>Unfortunately, since the Tascam corporation had not yet come out with multi-track tape, none of these have survived, and so all of this is hearsay.

<sup>3</sup>He was trying to create the first telephone answering machine.



invented the radio, and stories were spread to hundreds of thousands of people with that device. Pioneering writers and producers attempted to use this new medium to do what all artists attempt to do: get experience and feeling across to an audience.<sup>4</sup> The radio serial was invented, and it entertained people around the world for half a century before television came along, and was seen as "better" by the people who counted--the people with the money and the decision making power.

From a modern standpoint, those corporate heads of the late forties and early fifties were right: television shows were better than the early radio programs. Having listened to approximately twenty hours of these shows, it is my belief that they did not do their job: to get across experience and feeling; to tell stories; to the full capacity offered by the medium. A moving picture of an event simply hit closer to home than anything that was being produced for radio at that time.

Now, things have changed drastically. Americans are discovering that in some cases, listening to a voice can be more pleasurable and more convenient than watching and listening at the same time. You can't watch Larry King or Rush Limbaugh<sup>5</sup> from the driver's seat of your car, or while you're taking a walk or doing yard work. Yet you can (if you're like hundreds of thousands of people in the US, and have a walkman or a radio in your car or your home) turn on the radio.

Once again, stories are finding their way to the ear. Authors are reading their works into tape machines, and selling them through bookstores as "audio-books." Some of the minds behind audio publishing are using the potential of the sound medium to engage our imaginations in a way that television can't hope to imitate. Americans are rediscovering the joy of storytelling. The logical extension of this rapid, recent growth of recorded storytelling is a new type of "radio theatre:" recorded storytelling with more realistic sound, and with the actual voices of the characters, the actual auditory imagery that surrounds the experience and feeling the writer wishes to convey.

There's a scene in George Lucas' movie, The Return of the Jedi, that illustrates this new, fuller, technically assisted type of storytelling. The robot, C-3PO, is narrating the story of his adventures to a tribe of aboriginal "Ewoks,"

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<sup>4</sup>It is interesting to note that the words "audio" and "audience" both come from the Latin "audire," which means "to hear."

<sup>5</sup>some would say, thankfully

which look like little live Teddy Bears with primitive spears and garments made from animal skins. While he tells his story, he is able to insert actual sounds (which, presumably, his computer memory has simply recorded) into the narration. Sounds of laser battles and spaceships and other characters emerge from his mouth, mingled with his words. The Ewoks were fascinated, and so was I.

This type of audio<sup>6</sup> is the future of storytelling. Over my Senior Scholar year, I realized more and more that I was not so much unearthing a dead art as uncovering the approaching birth of a new one. This new art combines the age old method of storytelling with the "changelessness" of the written word and the immediacy of television and the movies. It engages our imagination with words while putting us "there" with sounds. It is the logical extension of storytelling and of the audio-book.

This, then, is how I see "radio theatre." It is not necessarily on the radio, as it will probably be sold through bookstores. It is not necessarily theatre, as it can (and in the case of my work, will) be more like a storytelling event, with live-action character voices and sounds backing up the story. It is actually audio-publishing, and I am very thankful to Colby College for allowing me the time and support I needed to put myself at its forefront during my Senior Scholar year.

## SEMESTER ONE

When I got accepted to the Senior Scholar program, I already had plans of making a career in the world of audio fiction.<sup>7</sup> I was involved in an ongoing project in radio sketch comedy, and I was anxious to start improving my skills as a writer and producer. I saw sketch comedy as a good way to sharpen those skills, and so I decided to continue making episodes of the radio sketch comedy show I was in, called Gale Force Theater. I would also listen to as much radio theatre as time and money permitted. Finally, I would take an apprentice position at a local commercial station called WTOS, where I would work on the morning music and comedy show.

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<sup>6</sup>minus the robot and the Ewoks

<sup>7</sup>See the first section of this paper, "Why a Senior Scholar Project in Radio Theatre?"



I started my apprentice work before I was even accepted to the Senior Scholar Program. During Jan Plan<sup>8</sup> I drove to WTOS every weekday-morning. A co-member of Gale Force Theater, Jon Zack, also apprenticed at WTOS. Together, we went in every morning while it was still dark and began to pull the morning's advertisements and to file CD's. You have to be willing to take on a certain amount of this "grunt" work if you want to get inside of any business. We took on our grunt work with enthusiasm, and occasionally, one of us was allowed to play a character in a sketch.

During this time of live radio performance, I always pictured a thirty-year old guy driving a small taupe economy car and listening to me. I performed for him. When I consciously realized that I had been picturing this "audience" for some time, I mentioned it to the morning host, Tom O. Tom said he did the same thing.<sup>9</sup> At this time, I realized that modern American radio theatre is directed at an audience of one. I thought about the audio plays and stories I had listened to, and about how I always listened to them alone. I remembered the times I had tried to play any radio or audio theatre or fiction (mine or someone else's) for even a small group of people. They always started to talk, or even left the room eventually, declaring that they had something else to do. At the time, I had thought the stuff just wasn't good enough. Upon working for WTOS and, more fully, just now, I realized that today's average American does not have the mind set needed for social radio theatre listening.

After a few weeks, I submitted a sketch to WTOS. It was put into Tom O's briefcase, and remained there until the next week, when Tom O came in an hour late, with nothing written.

"Okay," he said, "get the sound effects ready, we're going to do it."

I knew how to get sound effects ready. We recorded them, from a CD or vinyl record, onto a "cart" or cartridge tape, which is simply a convenient, one-button tape that all radio stations used at the time. (They could be fast-wound to exactly the right point so that, when the DJ was ready, he could just press the button and the right sound would come out).

I spent some two hours getting the sounds ready for my two-minute sketch that morning. I am a perfectionist, and I am also a little slow. I decided, during this time, that live radio was not for me.

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<sup>8</sup>for non-Colbyites, this is an entire three or four credit college course crammed into one month of classes.

<sup>9</sup>He did not specify a color of the car.

I was, however, interested in producing taped radio and audio fiction. I wanted, desperately, to improve my production skills in this area. I wanted to make Gale Force Theater cleaner and clearer and easier to listen to. What, I thought, is the point of having great ideas and great scripts if nobody can understand them once they're recorded? I knew I was either going to have to buy better equipment than the stuff I owned and was borrowing from the AV department at Colby, or I was going to have to buy some professional studio time.

Since most professional engineers know nothing about recording fiction, I decided to try buying my own stuff. Microphones were my first priority. Starting with a clean signal is the first step toward a good quality audio product, and Colby's AV microphones left a lot to be desired. The cheapest, good-quality microphones on the market, I found after a little checking, were called "Shure SM-57's." They were reputed, by engineers, music teachers, and DJ's alike to be cheap and to deliver good sound while being solid enough (no kidding) to double as hammers. Unfortunately, these cheap, decent microphones were \$100 each, and I would need four. I was going to find it hard to afford that on my two days per week bartending wage. And what about better recording equipment? I wanted to be able to layer more sound. To go from four "tracks" on tape,<sup>10</sup> which I found limiting, to eight. I looked up the price of a cheap eight track recorder,<sup>11</sup> and found nothing under \$1,000. Digital effects processors, which would allow me to alter our voices,<sup>12</sup> were also out of my price range, as were mixers, which are necessary for controlling the relative volumes of tape "tracks." None of the members of Gale Force Theater were interested in paying a lot of money. I would have to find another way.

I asked everyone I could think of about the possibility of finding a low-price professional recording studio near Waterville. The answers I got convinced me that I wouldn't find anything closer than Portland, and that I could expect to pay upwards of sixty dollars an hour for any studio worth its

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<sup>10</sup>"Multi-tracking" involves dividing a strip of audio tape into two or more "tracks," each of which can be recorded and controlled separately. This allows dialogue to be recorded during one recording session, and music and sound effects to be recorded in successive sessions. Multi-tracking has been used by musicians for decades--The Beatles recorded Abbey Road on two four-track recorders.

<sup>11</sup>Eight track recorders have almost nothing to do with the familiar "eight-track tapes" of the seventies.

<sup>12</sup>for "on-the-phone" effects, monsters, echoes for different locations, etc...

name. One day, a bar patron told me that there was a nice studio at the University of Maine at Augusta, but that nobody could use it unless they took the music recording course there. Since I did not have a car or the time or money to take on another course, I decided against taking the class.

One day, I remembered a business card I had taken off a bulletin board about a year earlier. I checked my wallet, and was surprised to find that I still had the thing. "Cavern Recording," it read. "Record your own masterpiece." The telephone number had an "87" prefix. There was a studio in Waterville after all.

I called the number, and spoke to a guy named Floyd. He was interested in doing business with me. He told me he charged \$15 per hour. I had been told \$60 was cheap. I wondered if this guy had a legitimate studio. I asked him if he had a mixer.

When I checked out the studio in person, I could hardly believe my eyes. I had never seen so much expensive, complicated-looking equipment; so many blinking lights. To me, it looked like the bridge of some futuristic star ship. The reels of tape were the size of dinner plates. The mixer was bigger than the one at WTOS, and had about five times as many knobs on it. I explained my project to Floyd, while trying to keep my enthusiasm down, and managed to talk him down to a "bulk" price of \$10 per hour for an estimated 100 hours of work.

Even \$1000 was stretching things in all directions. In the first place, I just didn't make that kind of money. In the second place, it had taken us twenty hours of work last semester to produce each half hour show. At that rate, I would need 200 hours of studio time, and not 100. Even with the bargain of the century staring me in the face, I still couldn't afford to move Gale Force Theater into a recording studio.

Necessity gave birth to invention. I began to notice that WTOS, like other radio stations, played "canned" comedy, taken from CDs. I asked Tom O where this came from, and he told me. There are national sketch comedy production companies that make about twenty sketches each, every week, which they then ship to radio stations nation-wide. These radio stations can play whatever sketches they want, without paying any money. The catch is that they must also play a given number of commercials, which the sketch comedy production companies make for certain national corporations like McDonald's and Fashion



Bug and Wal Mart. The national corporations, in turn, pay the comedy production companies for their services.

Inspired by this barter-type arrangement, I asked Floyd if he would be willing to trade studio time for the airing of a commercial for Cavern Recording. He said he would. Then I asked Tom O if he would be willing to air a commercial for Cavern Recording in return for the rights to play any of our sketches each week. He said he'd talk to his boss.

This was a great plan, but it had one major flaw. Tom O knew I would've paid him to put our sketches on the radio. I had just been too eager about the whole thing, and it fell through.

I was stuck. But if you're going to do something as daring as unearthing a lost art, you've got to be prepared to take risks, and keep your eyes on the prize rather than the obstacles. Against my fears, I told Floyd I would pay him the \$1000, plus whatever extra fees I incurred for studio time over 100 hours.

As a final effort to improve sound quality, I ordered some professional level, digitally recorded sound effects. I had always used sound effects from CDs, because our microphones had always been so poor that we couldn't record our own. But the CD sound effects I had been working with often sounded like they were coming through a couple of inches of mud. WTOS had a free sample disc of seventy-five of the best sound effects I had ever heard, and I called the company that had produced these effects and told them I wanted a sample disc of my own. They sent me a disc, and told me to use the effects in my productions. I liked them so much I bought an entire \$300 collection. I had to sell my four-track recorder, which we had used to record the show the previous semester, in order to afford the effects. I managed to get \$300 for this machine, which was exactly what I had paid for it four months and ten shows ago.

Faced with the prospect of recording (and paying for) our first show, I began to think of ways to cut back on studio time. We could meet and discuss the order of the sketches before the recording session. We could rehearse. I could make a stock version of the opening and closing credits which we could play every week. I could locate all the sound effects in my CD collection at home before we recorded them on the master tape. These plans worked, but not enough.

The semester got off to a wobbly start. We took fifteen hours to record the first show. That was fifty dollars extra, on top of the \$200 down payment I

had given to Floyd. I was broke and frightened. The show, however, came out good. I took the digital audio-tape copy from the studio at three o'clock on Monday morning, and went home. I had cut my hours back at WTOS for the spring semester, but I still had to be there on Mondays, Wednesdays, and Fridays. I went in at 5:30, operating on two hours of sleep. There, I recorded all the Gale Force Theater sketches onto "carts"<sup>13</sup> which I had bought expressly for that purpose. When Wednesday came around, the members of Gale Force Theater met at the WMHB broadcasting studio to help air the show.

We had made some signs, and spread them around. A friend of mine had designed a poster of a gale force advisory flag with the show's name written on the front. Above and below were the words "If you don't know what it is, stick your finger in it," advice from a recurring character, "Science Chat" host Ed Graves, to his young listening audience. We had spread about thirty of these posters, and hoped many people would be listening.

Dan Austin, a friend of mine from the Waterville Morning Sentinel, was in the studio with us, pad and pen in hand. We were going to get written up for the second time in our career. I hit the button on the cart containing our opening "montage," a collage of sounds which I'd put together in the AV room on a reel-to-reel tape deck (by first recording sounds and then cutting them out with a razor blade and taping them together). This one-minute montage had taken me eight hours to make, but it turned out to be worth every minute. To our fans, this weekly sound smorgasbord was the most looked forward to and memorable part of the show.

We alternated between playing sketches, talking, and playing sound effect montages, for a half hour. When it was all over, I felt harried, but successful. The show was far better than the one we had produced and aired during the previous semester. Later, I gave the sketches to Tom O, and he played some of them on the WTOS morning show, reaching all of central Maine.

Around this time, a friend of mine told me that he was going to be taking a multi-track recording class in Augusta. He asked me if I would be interested in going with him, if he provided transportation. I already knew about this class. I knew that it taught audio-engineering, and that it was the prerequisite to the audio-recording independent study at UMA, which was basically free

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<sup>13</sup>Cartridge tapes. These are standard radio-station tapes which are easily "bulked"--(erased) and "cued"--(fast forwarded to the beginning of a given recording).



studio time. I thought about the future, and told my friend I would definitely take the course with him. We had missed the first week, but the teacher agreed to let us in during the second. I decided I would lump the class in as part of my project. I even managed to scrape up enough money to pay tuition.

I needed more money. Peter Harris, head of the Senior Scholar board at the time, suggested going after a grant from the special projects fund. I did, and I asked for \$1,600. I got \$250, the maximum allowable grant. The check came in on the same day that Floyd called to tell me I was due for another \$200 studio payment.

The next week, the digital audio-tape recorder, or DAT recorder, at WTOS broke. I could not record the sketches onto my carts, and so the show could not go on. "The show must go on," I told myself, quoting the old adage. I brought the digital tape of the show back to Cavern Recording, where Floyd made a cassette copy for me. I played this on Wednesday, and had problems finding the beginnings of sketches. Listeners complained that the pauses between sketches were too long. There was too much music. This was because of the relative "cue-lessness" of cassette tapes when compared to carts. I had to play music while I hunted for the beginning of the next sketch.

Tom O told me there was no telling when the DAT recorder would be fixed. He said it could be months. I had to find another way to record our sketches onto carts.

WMHB had a cart machine, but no DAT recorder for playing the show. The AV room at Colby had a cart machine it could let us borrow, but it was a mono device, and our show was recorded in stereo. A new cart machine would cost over \$2000. I had a week to find a solution. I remembered how easy it had been to cut and splice reel tape. If I had a reel-to-reel recorder, I thought, we could record all the sketches onto a reel, and then I could edit out the pauses and edit the montages directly into the tape. Then, I could plug the recorder into the mixing board at WMHB, and there would be no need of carts at all. Of course, we would still have to stop the tape for the live sketch introductions we always did. It was an option, anyway. I looked around for a used reel machine that week. In the meantime, we "mixed"<sup>14</sup> the third installment of our show (GFT # 13) down to a cassette in the studio, editing out

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<sup>14</sup>"Mixing down" involves recording the sound on the multi-track tape onto a more common tape format, like DAT or cassette or cartridge tape. This is when all the voices, effects, and music on tape are "frozen" at reasonable relative levels.

all the pauses as well as we could. This took longer and added more hiss, but worked out fairly well. That week, however, the tape deck at WMHB broke down, and I had to rush home at the last minute and get a tape deck to plug into the console, through the microphone jacks on the broken tape deck. This arrangement made the show sound loud and distorted. Still, the show went on. The engineer at WMHB told me it could be weeks before the tape deck was fixed.

I ordered a used reel-to-reel deck from a place out west, and it arrived three days later. I got it just in time to record our fourth show that semester, GFT #14. By now, Floyd and I had developed a system, and we were saving time. We would record all the voices onto tracks one, two, three, and four. Then, later in the week, we would record all the music onto track five, then all the ambient<sup>15</sup> sound effects onto track six. Finally, all the other sound effects, which I call "punctual sfx" because they are short and placed in between lines of dialogue like punctuation marks, would be recorded on tracks seven and eight. We were getting shows recorded in ten to twelve hours, and my financial situation was getting less scary.

The next show went smoothly enough. My reel machine had an electric eye, so if I inserted a piece of clear leader in between the sketches, the tape would stop on cue. The machine started to have technical problems, but none of them were devastating, at first.

The writing side of my project seemed to take a back seat to everything else. There was so much to learn, technically, and I already knew how to write. Jim Boylan consistently lauded the sketches I had written, though he seldom knew that they were mine. This kept me satisfied with the writing, until such time as I could really concentrate on improving.

During the airing of GFT #16, my reel machine's take-up motor died. I had to wind the tape up by spinning the reel with my forefinger for about half the show. Luckily, the warranty still had one day left on it, and so I was able to get a full refund just in time to pay for the next studio installment. Sometimes, you get lucky.

The rest of the shows were first mixed to a high-quality "metal" cassette (which contained less tape-hiss) and then recorded onto carts for cueing power.

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<sup>15</sup>backdrop type sounds like wind, traffic, etc.

The sound quality didn't suffer much, and this turned out to be a simple way to run the show.

In my audio class, meanwhile I learned about the technical side of recording. Using a 16-track recording studio, my friend Mark Marussich and I recorded and mixed three contemporary songs. I learned to run a studio larger than the one at Cavern Recording, with more lights and knobs and, if possible, looking even more like the bridge of a star-ship.

One day, our class made a short play, and recorded all the sound effects live. These were much easier to put on tape than CD effects, because they could be tailor made to fit the situation. And with a good studio, good quality effects could be made on the spot. I tried using live effects in the making of our subsequent sketches, and was pleased with the results.

To improve my knowledge of radio theatre, I listened to hours of it, made in England and the US. I called a man named "Meatball" Fulton, who has been producing what he calls "audio adventures" in New York for the last twenty years. He gave me some insights into recording and writing for radio, but he told me that nobody would ever get rich making radio stories. It would just never be that big, he told me.

During the spring semester, I had jumped headfirst into radio theatre. I learned so much so fast that it is difficult for me to imagine now how I thought about audio before that four month period of immersion training. Overall, I learned that flexibility and resourcefulness; always keeping all your options open; and never giving up; are tantamount to reaching any long term goal.

## SEMESTER TWO

Sitting here at my little desk, in a bedroom cluttered with all manner of scripts, tapes, and audio fiction paraphernalia, I realize I have met my goal of creating a large amount of modern American radio theatre, and of gaining a thorough understanding of the medium. A large part of that goal, of course, was fulfilled during my first semester as a Senior Scholar. But there was still a long way to go. Our sketch comedy show, although called "smart and funny" and "well produced" by our faculty sponsor, did not satisfy me. I wanted to be able to make a piece of audio fiction that the average, non-radio-theatre-lover could enjoy. I wanted people to be able to listen in, and know (and be



entertained by) what was happening. I would devote the rest of my time at Colby to producing a four to six episode radio serial. This show would be a comedic cliffhanger: bizarre and enticing and riveting. The sound alone would be enough to keep people interested, but of course there would be a great story line as well.

I decided to write the script over the summer, but summer being, well... *summer*, I seemed to find other things to do. I learned to navigate a kayak down a white-water river. I fell in love (again) with my ex-girlfriend. I wrote, but it was always rudimentary, and there was always something else I wanted to be doing.

Fall arrived faster than I had expected. I talked to Jim Boylan about the possibility of whittling the project down to four half-hour episodes. He agreed to my request, and I went home and began to write with more discipline and regularity.

Through listening to my own work and to the work of others, I had formed some opinions about writing for audio. I started to create my own style. I had learned, for one thing, that a scene of sound is almost never self-explanatory, no matter how good the engineer is at his or her job. More frequently, sounds are only there to back up and fill out the narration or dialogue. Most sounds must be explained or introduced by words, as in: "The vase fell off my kitchen table"--SMASH. Likewise, no action takes place, in the audio realm, without an accompanying sound effect. The smallest move, like crossing the legs, should be backed up with a whiffing of fabric. Even something as seemingly silent as raising the eyebrows can be made more solid in the imagination of the listener by adding a brief "Hmmm..." from the actor.

Audio scenes can be more effective than either printed or visual scenes, because they contain the strong points of both. For instance, the setting can be described verbally, and introduced with sounds. A scene that takes place in a store, for example, might start with a description of the store. Simultaneously, we hear the introductory "ding" of a cash-register opening, backed by the murmur and movement of a roomful of customers. This murmur continues as the scene ensues, sewing action and setting together.

Characters must be differentiated from one another. This can be done during casting, by simply choosing people who don't sound alike, or during production, by changing voice pitches or adding other digital effects, but writing is the ideal stage for character differentiation. Having a character

constantly chew and snap gum, or say all his or her lines with a mouthful of chewing tobacco and the occasional spit-ding can help.

I used my new knowledge in the writing of the scripts, and by October, I had finished writing two episodes. Those sixty pages had taken longer to write than I had thought they would, even though I had adapted a few parts of my serial from old stories I had written. I decided to write episodes three and four while I recorded episodes one and two. I had decided to record my project at The University of Maine at Augusta, as an independent study in audio recording.

I began to cast the roles. I had never been faced with this problem during the twenty-five half-hour sketch comedy shows which my colleagues and I at Gale Force Theatre had produced. As they had graduated in the spring, however, I had no choice but to find others to act out my story. Would they know what to do? Would they be as good as Sarah, Pat, and Jon? I was frightened.

I called a friend of mine, Dan Austin, who had given the sketch comedy shows two favorable reviews in The Morning Sentinel. I knew he did some community theatre acting, and I asked him if he would be interested in helping me with my project. He told me he would be delighted. He gave me the phone numbers of other community theatre actors who might also be interested, and I contacted them. I also called Tara Estra, who was doing a Senior Scholar project in theatre at Colby, and asked her for some names. Finally, I called a man named Jay Hardy, whom I had met the previous semester while taking the audio recording course at UMA. He had a great voice, and I told him so. He sounded interested, and so we met for lunch. I also met with a community theatre actor named Joe Crommarty who was, he said, very interested in radio theatre. Upon reading my scripts, however, he remarked that they were the strangest things he had ever read. Later, he retracted his offer to help me.

When you do anything for the first time, you're going to make mistakes. This is all part of the learning process, and I knew that then, but the knowledge didn't help to make my experience any less painful. I cast roles based more on friendship and faith than a strong belief in talent and ability. I put Dan Austin, the reporter/actor, in the lead, narrator role, without first being satisfied by his acting prowess. I cast one of his friends as Sally MacIntosh, the cowgirl, without first hearing the woman act. Later, I found someone who had a better southern accent, and cast her instead, stepping on



the feelings of the first woman. I cast Jay Hardy from UMA as the cowboy, based on his pleasing, south-western voice. I cast Chris Kuhlthau, a local actor, as The Mayor, based on the fact that I couldn't find anyone else.

On the whole, I got lucky. I was very pleased, when my first recording session arrived, with Tanya, Jay, and Chris. However, Dan Austin was a complete failure. He had the lead role, the narrator, which I had intended to be played straight. However, for some reason, he kept slipping into a goofy, cartoon character voice. He had done this when I auditioned him, but had assured me he could lose the accent when we recorded. During the session, I brought this up, and he told me it was difficult, because he was, by nature, a character actor. I asked him if he would rather play another part, and he said no, and that he could handle things.

Dan continued to slip into the goofy accent for three hours, and I felt obliged to stop nagging him. He also had trouble reading the script, and pronouncing large words. He mispronounced "bovine coloscopy" as "bovine colossopy" three times, finally coming up with "holine coloscopy" on the fourth run-through.

In addition to Dan's problems, I was discovering that I knew next to nothing about recording. I had trouble just getting the voices on tape. Every time somebody made a mistake or stuttered a word, I had to start over. At the end of the night, I was in a state of deep despair. I did not want to hear what we had recorded that night ever again. I apologized to the rest of the group. I dreaded recording the next three episodes, but made an effort to set a recording date. That was when Tanya, my cowgirl, told me she had thought this was the only session. She said she couldn't commit to any more work. Added to this, I knew I owed \$300 to UMA for the independent study class, and that I had spent \$400 on audio-tape, which I had purchased on credit, the same day I got the credit card in the mail. With the payment dates approaching, I had just over \$100 in my bank account. Everything seemed to be crashing down around me.

I spent a few days telling myself I was screwed. Finished. Done for. The project was a flop. It would never work. I convinced myself that I had failed, and then decided to find a way to keep going anyway. I was beginning to feel like the undaunted cowboy in my story.

First, I decided, I had to cut the project back. The writing had taken a back seat to production, and I knew now that I simply didn't have time to

write and produce four shows. I talked to Jim Boylan and reduced the project to one hour total. That was one third of the size of the original project. I was disappointed, but I knew I could produce something worth listening to, however short.

Second, I had to get rid of Dan Austin, no matter how much I liked him personally. I called him up and gave him the news, telling him it had nothing to do with him as a person. He took my decision poorly, hanging up on me and spending the next few weeks at the restaurant calling me an "asshole" to my co-workers, who eventually told him to choose between shutting up and finding a new restaurant.

Third, I had to find some new actors. I did some more hunting, resolving, this time, to satisfy myself about each candidate's acting ability. I interviewed four or five people for the lead role, settling on Brent Felker, who was the most enthusiastic and best actor I had encountered yet. I had seen Brent in a play that summer, and had been genuinely impressed by the job he did. I also added Kevin Ladd, another friend of mine from work, based not on our friendship, but on the fact that he possessed a wide repertoire of great voices. I gave him a very small trial part.

Finally, I fixed my financial situation. I was able to get \$400 in funding from the generous people from the special projects fund. The money came just in time for me to pay my bills, and I turned my attention back to recording.

Setting up another session proved difficult. Tanya Boynton did not want to come at all. She didn't have time. The others had conflicts with many of the dates I suggested, and when we did agree on a session date, the studio was booked. Finally, we came together on Monday, October 25th, and re-recorded the first episode.

This second session was the opposite of the first. Everybody understood their lines. I brought doughnuts, made coffee, and made my helpers take breaks every half-hour, even when they didn't want to. I had asked Bill Mosely, the audio professor, about improving my skills, and he had given me some pointers. The most helpful tip was about "punching-in," a procedure whereby the engineer can start recording during the middle of an already recorded sentence, if necessary. Using this technique, I was able to let the actors re-record a single stuttered word or phrase, thus greatly reducing the time and work involved.

At the end of the night, everyone was excited. We were all happy with Brent as the narrator, and with our own parts in recording some great material. Jay Hardy even offered to play his Do-Ro (slide guitar) for me to back up the western scenes. I went home happy.

The following Monday, November 1st, was our second and final recording date. This did not go quite as well as the first one, but I was still happy. I knew what the problems were, and how most of them could be fixed in the future. Some of the actors didn't seem to know what their lines meant, and I had cast some of my actors in the wrong roles. I would simply have to spend more time casting and rehearsing in the future. Finally, the writing had been less than perfect. I had had to finish a four-episode story in two episodes, and I couldn't come up with an ending. Therefore, I had not given the scripts to the actors and actress until a few days before the session. The relative mediocrity of the second half is due, mostly, to sloppiness caused by a lack of time.

The next week, I booked more studio time. Jay Hardy came in with his Do-Ro, and another friend of mine, Bill Butler, arrived with his keyboard. We spent four hours laying down all the music tracks for the hour-long show. I liked the way the music added feeling to the words, but was disappointed with my choice of one particular keyboard theme. Later that night, Chris Kuhlthau (the actor) and Mark Marussich (a friend of mine) helped me record some of the sound effects. I felt like I had things well in hand.

There was one more "live" sound effects session, which lasted over six hours. We were able to lay down about a quarter of the sound effects. I began to wonder if even one hour of finished product was biting off more than I could chew. Still, I booked more studio time. Because of schedule conflicts, I couldn't get anyone to help me lay down more "live" sound effects. I had to take most of the remaining effects from my CD collection, which I was becoming dissatisfied with. CD effects took up twice as much time, and creating effects on the spot was simply more effective. I was able to make some of my own effects at home, using the digital audio-tape recorder (DAT) I had purchased that summer. DAT effects could be made-to-order, but they didn't solve my time problems.

I had tried for weeks to gain access to a computer that would cut down on sound effect time, but had met with failure. Jon Hallstrom, head of Colby's music department, had promised to lend me a sound editing program which would allow me to create my own effects and reproduce them at the touch of a



button. The problem with this software was that it required a special, fairly rare computer. After weeks of letter writing and talking to different Colby employees, I had gained access to such a computer, only to find that Jon Hallstrom had misplaced the software.

During this time, Jim Boylan commented that I seemed to like to do everything as late as possible, with the highest amount of stress. I agreed, disappointed that I hadn't been able to get the software from Hallstrom. Luckily, I discovered (while complaining to Bill Mosely) that the UMA studio had a digital effects processor that could do almost everything the computer software could do. I used this processor to record and play back everything from horse hooves to spittoon dings to gunshots.

After about forty more hours of recording, all the sounds were on tape. All that remained was to mix them down to acceptable relative levels, and to add all the echo, delay, reverb, and equalization to the sounds. This proved to be more difficult than I had expected.

There were sixteen tracks on my tape, each containing a voice, or some music, or a string of sound effects. Each of these tracks had to be continuously adjusted during the mix-down process, not just by volume, but by adjusting the stereo left-and-right panning and the tonal qualities (or equalization). Also, there would be about ten effects "channels" which would make people sound like they were on the phone, or on television, or a leprechaun, and so on. Basically, I would have to be able to monitor and adjust upwards of 625 knobs and "faders."<sup>16</sup> I realized, with a shock, that there was no way I would ever be able to handle all the work.

I called Bill Mosely, the audio professor, again, and asked him if he had any suggestions. He told me that I was in luck: that he had recently purchased a computerized automation system that could help me by remembering knob and fader moves. I could program the computer to adjust many of the knobs for me, and to mute and un-mute certain "channels" when necessary. I was relieved, and made an appointment to learn how to use the automation system.

The automation system was (luckily) driven by a user-friendly Macintosh computer. This did not stop the mix-down process from taking twenty-four hours to complete. I had to program the effects processors to make people sound like they were on the phone and television at times, and to raise and

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<sup>16</sup>These are sliders which serve the same function as knobs.

lower the pitch of the voices at other times to differentiate between the characters. Then, I equalized all of the voices. (Equalization involves adding or taking away bass, midrange, and treble tones to make the voices sound more natural and less "flat" and recorded). Finally, I played the tape over and over again, making subtle changes here and there, all of which were remembered by the computer.

I was frustrated by the fact that the voices I recorded were too quiet at times and too loud at other times. I had to keep turning them up or down. I discovered that I could have saved myself hours of work and frustration in that area by "compressing" all the voices during the recording sessions. Compression boosts all signals below a certain level and lowers all signals above another level, making for a more even volume. I learned to my dismay that it was too late to compress my voices once they were recorded, as this would boost the inherent tape hiss and could ruin my project.

Once the computer was ready, I sent the output of the mixing console to a "DBX" unit, which reduces hums and hisses. Then I recorded all the sounds on the sixteen track tape onto a simple quarter-inch reel-to-reel tape for easy editing and playback.

I hadn't quite finished yet, and so I booked more studio time. Over the course of the semester, I had made several sound collages or audio "montages" like the one that had opened every episode of Gale Force Theater. These had to be taped, physically, into the final mix-down of the project, along with several other sounds that I hadn't yet inserted. I recorded over fifty sounds and montages onto strips of tape, marked them, and cut them out, putting them in boxes around the room. At three in the morning, I realized that all of these sounds and montages were too loud. I threw them all away and started over, becoming so exhausted that I tripped over the phone cord while trying to evade something I saw out of the corner of my eye.<sup>17</sup> I finished all the cutting and splicing at eight in the morning, and copied the final results onto digital audio-tape by eleven, when Bill Mosely came in, chuckling.

The project had taken about ninety hours to record, and about forty to write. I had spent \$400 on the UMA class, \$400 on tape, and my parents had paid \$1,200 for the second half of the Senior Scholar credits at Colby. One hour of tape had taken one-hundred thirty hours to produce, and had cost \$2,000. I

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<sup>17</sup>This turned out to be a paper on the wall, blown by an equipment fan.



was jarred by this realization, but I also realized that this was very little time and money when compared to a movie or even a stage production. I am satisfied with the project, and so are others. Jim Boylan commented that the writing left something to be desired, and I agree, but I know now that I had simply bit off more than I could chew. The audio students at UMA were amazed at the quality of my work, and could not believe that I was able to record a full hour in only one semester. Most importantly, my friends from Waterville, whom I consider to be average American radio listeners, listened to the project and genuinely enjoyed it, both for the story and the recording quality.

I have achieved success, and a hunger for more. Next year, I am going to re-take the audio class at UMA, recording a more realistically sized collection of short stories. I will concentrate more on writing, casting, rehearsing, and directing, while keeping up the good work (and even improving) the production of my material. Eventually, Floyd White (of Cavern Recording) and I plan to start a small audio production business, selling fiction through catalogues for the blind and, hopefully, bookstores.

Colby's Senior Scholar program has given me the time and support I needed to grow from a curious person with nothing more than a goal, to someone with the knowledge and skills needed to carry out that goal. I will be forever grateful to Colby for that assistance, and to Jim Boylan for having the courage and patience to sponsor a project which must have seemed almost ethereal at times.