

Shepherd in Soup Over Soap As WOR Fires Him All Over Again

It isn't often that a performer can lay claim to having been fired, rehired and cut off the air and fired, all in the short span of a week. So if Jean Shepherd, the now ex-WOR, N. Y. all-night talkathon artist, whose loyal following has been described as a cult and who turned a literary hoax into a probable bestseller, claims some sort of record, let no one dispute it.

It looks at last as if the running battle between the unorthodox Shepherd and the staid WOR management is finally over, with Shepherd off the station for good—this time. It all started a week ago Thursday (9) when WOR informed Shepherd that it would not renew his contract, which expired two days later (11). When Shepherd asked why, the reply was that he's not commercial enough.

When the news got out, Shepherd's flock got busy, deluging the station with calls and even holding a mass protest meeting in front of the burnt-out Wanamaker's Bldg. So WOR, in a "let's not be too hasty" turnabout, asked Shepherd to continue his show for another week pending negotiations on a new contract with the William Morris office, his agents. Shepherd agreed, and took to the air again Monday (13) on those conditions.

Everything was hunky till Thursday (16) night (actually Friday morning) when a listener phoned to say he had read that Shepherd can't sell soap, and wouldn't it be a good idea if all his listeners went out and bought a cake of soap to disprove the theory. "After all," the listener stated, "we night people wash, too."

So Shepherd went on the air with the message; everyone was to buy a cake of soap. But what brand? Shepherd called for suggestions, then repeated some of

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them. Somebody said, and Shepherd repeated, "How about Sweetheart Toilet Soap, it's a good brand and it doesn't do too much advertising" (station's version is that Shepherd said its sales aren't very good). So Shepherd told his listeners to go to their drug stores, buy a cake of Sweetheart Toilet Soap and tell 'em Jean Shepherd sent you. Also be sure to say "Excelsior."

That's when general manager Bob Leder, who hasn't been getting much sleep lately monitoring the hot-potato Shepherd's 1 to 5:30 a.m. stint, reportedly hit the ceiling. If he didn't reach the ceiling, he did make it to the phone, and called the transmitter in Carteret, N. J., and instructed the engineer to cut Shepherd off the air. So then came the inevitable "Due to conditions beyond our control . . ."

The following day, Shepherd merely said "I've been fired again." Leder said he couldn't have anybody insulting potential customers of the station (Sweetheart and Cashmere Bouquet, also mentioned, aren't advertisers on the station) and anyway, he wanted a less cultish personality and one who would appeal to a wider audience range. Shepherd, who apparently thought Leder blew up because he felt Shepherd was rubbing it in, insisted that it was "just a gag," but said he hadn't been able to get through to Leder during the day. The official WOR announcement stated that Shepherd "Continually interjected unauthorized commercial material" into the broadcast.

While WOR admittedly had two offices manning the phones to handle the protests on Friday, Shepherd was unconcernedly listening to offers from both CBS and NBC (one of them a television deal) and wrapping up the narration for a somewhat commercial enterprise, an industrial film for Worthington Generating Equipment Co. And WOR meanwhile set a replacement, a Parsippany, N. J., auctioneer name of Long John Nebel, whose done some work on the station in the past and who will conduct a deejay-interview-special features show