

Jean Shepherd A Master Of The Art Of Radio Humor

By JAY SHARBUTT

NEW YORK (AP) — Radio humor, says Jean Shepherd, is an art "rarer than a five-winged butterfly." He should know. He's been at the art here since 1958. This year, he was set loose nationally on NBC Radio.

For those who've never heard him, Shepherd isn't your usual Manhattan wise-guy. He's more of a free association cross between Mark Twain and Herb Shriver.

It's a pity he's only heard a few minutes on NBC's "Amphibian" on weekdays and on "Monitor" weekends. He has an uncanny ability to bring genuine Americana into verbal bas-relief.

Born in Chicago, he was raised in a northern Indiana steel mill town he never identifies, apparently for fear the Chamber of Commerce will someday hire a hit man to say hello with a load of hot slag.

Although his NBC effort and most of his local radio work concern modern persons, themes and events, much of Shepherd's fame stems from his spoken and written observations about youth in a rotting town.

He spins magnificent yarns about crappie fishing in fetid ponds, men who drink lots of boiler-makers, life at Warren G. Harding School and mythical boyhood pals like Schwartz,

Flick, Broder and Cosnowski.

He is considered a master of blue-collar nostalgia. He also considers this hon- or a bum rap.

"I'm not a reminiscer," he grouched. "I'm no more of a reminiscer than Bill Cosby. No, I'm serious. I've often wondered why, when Cosby talks about his mythical boyhood friends, it's never called nostalgia."

Shepherd, who does a 15-minute show on a local station here each weeknight, finds his audience a bit weird. They usually seem to recall only his dissertations on growing up in northern Indiana.

"I don't know why that is," he said. "I've discovered that any time you mention anything to do with childhood on the air that's as powerful to people as sex."

"The next thing you know, they think that's all you ever talk about," he said, referring to childhood. "I'll do three shows of satire on Norman Mailer and never hear a word about it, except from out of town."

"I may do one story about Schwartz and Flick and Broder and I'll get a letter saying, 'Gee, that's all you ever do and I love it.'"

Alas, the local radio image he hates may wind up on national TV because he wrote "Wanda Hickey's Night of Golden Memories and Other Disasters," a

collection of short stories about his adolescence.

He says there's a strong possibility the book will be made into a TV movie this fall. The producers, he added, "want to use it as the basis for a series and I'd work in it both as a writer and performer."

"They want to use an interesting technique, do it more or less in the 'Our Town' style, where I'd step in and out of scenes."

It'd be his second go at national television. In 1971, he was on public TV in a wonderful 13-part exploration of the nation's lesser-known corners in "Jean Shepherd's America."

It appeared during an exciting era in public TV, he said, "but now they're into old reruns of BBC castoffs. It's considered a great new program idea. They're really deep into an Anglophile bag."

But the professor of past and modern Americana doesn't feel all is lost yet: "In fact, I saw a funny bumper sticker the other day on Sixth Avenue. It said, 'Impeach Alistair Cooke.'"