

The Great Benyon

29 March 1901 – 14 Sept 1978

What you do for nothing is appreciated for nothing.



The surname 'Beynon' was originally Welsh meaning 'stability and fortitude' yet many family members moved to Ireland then travelled to Australia in the 19th Century as convicts or trades folk. Born in Auckland, **Edgar Wilson Beynon** entered the world, as if by magic, on 29 March 1901. His parents William and Sarah (b. Wilson) Beynon moved to Christchurch three years later. They were hard working Baptists who tried hard to prevent their son from doing the Devil's work on stage but later gave in when Edgar promised never to drink alcohol or smoke, a pledge he kept.

Sarah was a dressmaker and William a printer that specialised in poster work; he was often given free tickets to shows; Variety and Magic he kept and the rest he gave to his fellow workers. Sarah refused to go into 'that den of iniquity' so he often took his sons along, which was probably a bad idea as young Edgar was soon practicing magic and saving for magic props. Edgar was the second of 6 siblings; Melville, Arnold, Robert, Margaret and Mavis. He was educated at schools in Linwood, Sydenham and New Brighton.

Perhaps now is a good time to explain what may seem to be a typo. Many years later when Edgar was performing professionally in London, he was shocked to find himself advertised as 'The Great Benyon' at London's *Coliseum Theatre* and complained to the theatre's managing director, Sir Oswald Stoll: No! He would not correct it. Why? Because 'Benyon' looked better, sounded better and was easier to remember! So 'Edgar Beynon' it remained and his nickname became 'Ben'.



Edgar's first childhood show was fire-eating at his Sunday school which went down well; his mum made the Mandarin costume and soon he was out twice a week doing shows. His school work suffered so the shows were banned but Edgar continued, telling his parents that he was going out to bible classes or scouts. Of course, word soon filtered back to his father and he confiscated Edgar's props.

Of course the boy soon acquired new tricks and practiced secretly until his father gave in and helped him convert the backyard coal-shed into a theatre where he could practice and put on shows for the neighbourhood. Edgar charged for admission but even so he had to take odd jobs to afford new tricks from Allan Robert's novelty shop. Also known as *Adair*, Allan became Beynon's first mentor.

Edgar quit school and took a series of jobs, none of which he excelled at, until his father demanded he take an apprenticeship with his letter-press printing company. Edgar watched other specialty acts and soon mastered ventriloquism, impersonation, juggling and balancing. His show combined them all.



He invited his sweetheart Doris Southern to join the act and play piano, and raised his prices. Then after winning a local talent quest, which included a week's work on a *Fuller's Vaudeville* show, he was offered a 10-week tour. The printing company soon tired of his absences and one day Edgar was called into the board room and told to get his act together. Beynon left, slamming the door behind him, and did get his act together. He was 17.

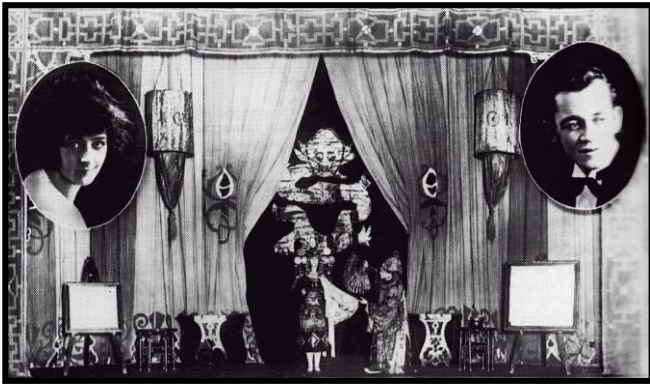
Together with his friend Colin Campbell, a talented concertina player, he put together a company to successfully tour a loop up the west coast and across the top of the South Island. Back in Christchurch he developed a quick-change act which went down big in Timaru. The key to the success of Edgar's stage show was, 'an act with a little bit of everything.' Edgar and Doris soon became engaged. A season with a show at Wellington's *Opera House* was a disaster and a following *Vaudeville Revue* tour through rural North Island towns didn't do much better. The highs and lows of show biz!



Fullers offered Edgar a national tour, opening in Auckland; his mother was ill but he managed to make it back from Dunedin in time to be with her as she passed away. Edgar was now 21. He took a ship to Sydney where he joined a *Fullers'* tour through the East coast as the '*New Zealand Wizard*'. Figuring that two could live as cheaply as one he invited Doris over to join the act; they married on 17 August 1922. In Melbourne they lucked out and picked up three days at the *Tivoli Theatre* to replace a delayed act. The pair received a standing ovation and the rest is legend.

While working in Sydney in 1923, daughter **Doris Jr.** decided to arrive 4 weeks premature, and so quickly that she appeared before the midwife could get there; Edgar did the job himself! Soon they were in Adelaide, then invited to tour South Africa for 3 months as *EDGAR BEYNON ASSISTED BY DORIS SOUTHERN*, the quick-changing mannequin. Rather than head back to Australia straight away, they decided to try their luck in England. Things did not go well but the day Edgar decided to book a steamer home to New Zealand he was lucky enough to meet theatrical agent Nat Day who got them a job at the *New Theatre Royal* in Worthing, a holiday resort on the South coast.

Nat Day became the Beynon's sole agent and they were soon booked 2 years in advance. Vaudeville theatre in England had become blasé with performers on long term contracts and rarely changing their acts. To local audiences the Benyon pair were like a breath of fresh air. They worked hard and by 1927 were ready to present a full evening magic show with backdrops, props, dancers, musicians and assistants. The full Monte! At the opening of each act Edgar would appear in a different costume and shout, 'It's me folk! Same man, different clothes!'



Their second daughter **Mavis** was born in 1926, allowing them to make it to hospital for showtime with 10 minutes to spare. In 1929 both girls were old enough to tour South Africa with their parents then the family sailed to Melbourne to join a *Tivoli* show; that's where their problems started. Houses were thin and the manager blamed Edgar and removed his name from out front. Truth was that

they were dealing with the new talking movies phenomenon and the onset of the depression. Two weeks later the family were heading back to England and a lucrative booking ... and another birth in 1930 with **Doreen**. And then they were five!

In 1935 Doris Jr. and Mavis were being boarded while their parents and Doreen went out on tour but two weeks later they rushed back to London; 9 year old Mavis had danced too close to an open fire and her ballet dress ignited, leaving her badly burnt and dying. Doris had tried to beat out the flames, burning her own hands and later received a medal for her bravery from Lady Baden Powell.

The old adage stood, 'No matter what, the show must go in.' The showbiz fraternity supported the fairly in their distress and eventually the Benyons returned to some semblance of normality. They accepted a 26 week engagement to tour Ireland with *Duffy's Circus* then began two years of Music Hall. Public tastes were changing and Edgar successfully put more Magic into the act.



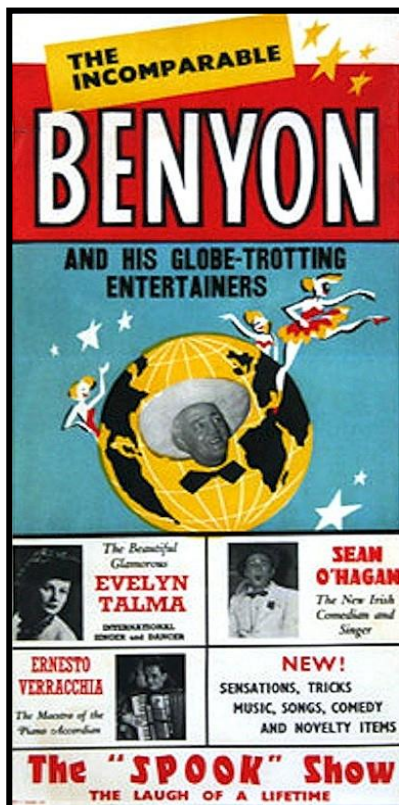
They were working the pier in Southsea for the 1939 summer season when war was declared and all theatres were closed; their next job was in neutral Ireland so they immediately sailed for Dublin, giving away their livestock and abandoning the car and trailer. He immediately picked up a 25-minute spot at the *Olympia Theatre*. Then Edgar put together his own show adding the *Barry Sisters*, and Bobby Fisher on piano and accordion and Doris Benyon Jr. now as the leading lady.

Edgar named the new show *Bam-Boo-Zalem* and they toured the small towns until winter set in. The Benyon show merged with Percy Holmshaw's company and travelled the country successfully for the next 2 years when, after an argument, Edgar set off on his own again. By now the show had fourteen changes of programs and a huge storage shed in County Down. Eventually Edgar had a large marquee built for summer touring that held an audience of 1000.



Both Doris and Doreen received a first class education and took lessons in dance as Edgar prepared them to join his show. While at school Doris entertained her friends with Magic shows and later she was able to step into her father's shoes and perform the show if he fell ill. When Doris Jr. (now with the stage name, Evelyn Talma) was seventeen she fell in love with a good-looking Irish army medical officer, but when Sean O'Hagan asked Edgar for her hand in marriage, Edgar declined, suggesting that he come back in four years. 'She can't cook, she's never done housework, she's too young and our religion is different to yours!' he was told. Coming from a headstrong family, Doris eloped two months later and she and Sean were married in 1940. When the ruffled feathers finally settled Edgar invited Sean to take over the business side of the show and Doris could return to what she knew best, performing.

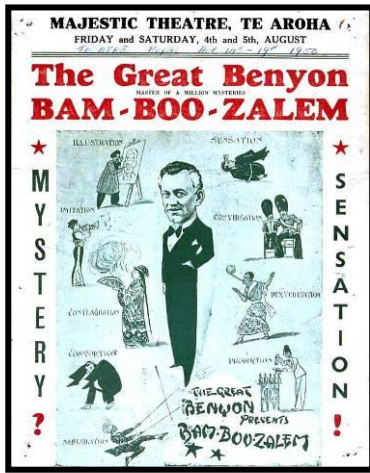
Edgar was the first professional magician to perform in Television' live from the *Alexandra Theatre* in 1938, and the first in Ireland to use black-light. The entire stage was draped in black velvet. All the costumes were made from the same material; the pile had to run the same way as the backdrop to blend in, otherwise they would show up and the illusion ruined. The chorus wore costumes with skeletons painted on the front and during the dancing they would apparently remove their heads or just have their heads dancing and the body missing. Edgar would make his appearance in a white suit and present such effects as the dancing handkerchief and the floating ball.



While touring Northern Ireland Edgar came upon a busker called Eddie Terree and was so impressed that he invited him to join the show. In January 1946 *Bam-Boo-Zalem* was back at the *Olympia Theatre* in Dublin then, as spring returned, they headed out for another season outside. In June they discovered that the tent had been stored damp and the seams had rotted; a strong wind pulled the stitching apart. They had it repaired but the next big storm tore it to shreds and the rain ruined their props, illusions and costumes. Luckily they were given the use of a church hall for 2 weeks and played to full houses every night.

The family accepted an offer to tour England, repaired their gear and costumes and opened in November at the *Palace Theatre* in Huddersfield. Although it was one of the coldest winters on record they played to good houses although only taking a 1/4 of what they would have made back in Ireland. Six months later they returned there with a new 2000-seater tent and new caravans and trucks and began touring again but once again bad luck dogged them and another storm tore their new tent to shreds. Edgar disbanded the company and booked a sailing for New Zealand. He brought along a brilliant accordionist Ernest Verrecchia and Michael Holden, a young midget.

The timing was not good for a magic tour with the country caught up in the 1949 general election. They opened to poor houses in Wellington so fired their promoter and went it alone. Things soon picked up and they successfully toured the South until it got cold and a number of their performers needed to return home.



All the large illusions and props were put into storage in Christchurch and they toured the smaller country areas to great success. They played 2 - 3 nights at each town and later returned with a new show. Once again they were travelling with a child after Evelyn had given birth to Mavis. In 1950 the show picked up some new acts; *Biko the Clown*, tenor Brian Hilliard and a troupe of acrobats. Trevor King handled their advertising.

Doreen met her future husband Dr Roy Holmes and they left for London where Roy was to continue his studies. Then in 1952 Sean heard that his sister had died leaving 4 children. Trevor King contacted them a few weeks later to tell them that their costumes, memorabilia and props stored at *J M Heywood & Co* in Christchurch had burnt to the ground, destroying everything. Many years before during WW2 their storage shed in London had been hit by a bomb! Yet, the smaller show was working

well so new costumes, props, scenery and smaller illusions were made and bookings made to tour Australia, starting in Victoria.

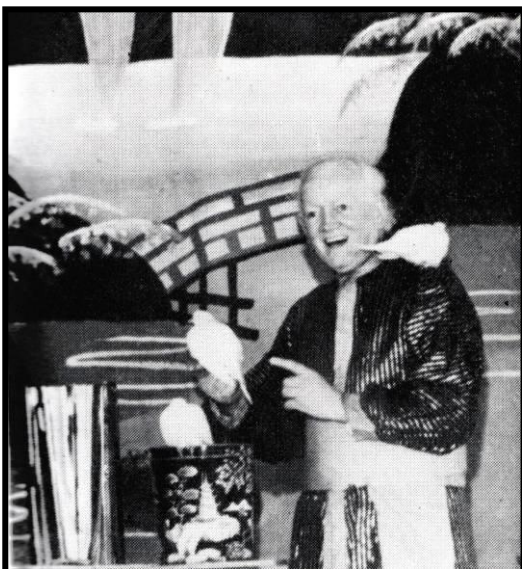
In 1953 the *Waterside Union* was on a nationwide strike and refused to unload their show, so for several weeks their equipment sailed back and forward across the Tasman without them until the dispute was over. All their bookings had been cancelled so they worked out a new itinerary, then Doris took ill and was hospitalised. The troupe worked nearby towns until she could rejoin them, then a flood hit the areas they had planned to visit so the new tour was abandoned. Then Edgar's father became ill! Hold everything! I think the universe is trying to tell you something Edgar.

The family returned to Christchurch to make plans for one more large tour; Edgar imported a *Hammond* organ from England and Ken Boniface took the drivers seat, accordionist Ernest Verrichia returned from Ireland and they added the 'Fairy Fountain' as a new finale.

This time luck was on their side and all went well. Kiwi hospitality greeted them wherever they showed and the halls were packed. Whilst touring the East Coast they were invited to entertain on many Marae, a great honour although it took a while to work out why the audiences were hissing them before finally realising that it was the sound of babies being breast fed during the show.



Evelyn was getting tired of living in hotel rooms and arranged for the purchase of a large caravan with a bathroom, bedroom, toilet and kitchen. Edgar was furious, 'people will think that we are a travelling gypsy show', he fumed, yet a week later he bought one himself. Strangely, every time they began planning a return overseas, a member of the family would become unwell. Evelyn nearly died and Edgar developed bronchitis and lost the sight of one eye. Television was changing the entertainment scene and anyway, they now had two granddaughters in New Zealand. Perhaps it was time to retire.



Sean took a job in Nelson as the city's public relations officer and he and Evelyn bought a house there. Edgar and Doris continued to travel with a downsized show, working at schools, A & P shows and Christmas carnivals and Evelyn helped out now and then. After his wife's death in 1922 Edgars father had remarried; he passed away in 1956. Sadly Doreen, now living in Christchurch, died in a car accident in 1958 at the age of 28 leaving behind three daughters. Edgar and Doris came off the road to help care for them but 3 months later he was back at work.



In 1968 the *Canterbury Society of Magicians* honoured Edgar with a celebration of his 60th year as an entertainer. Change was in the air. Sean was offered a job in Queensland and accepted then Mavis qualified as a psychiatric nurse, married and moved to England. In their own now, Edgar and Doris chose to winter over in Auckland and only travel during the warm months.

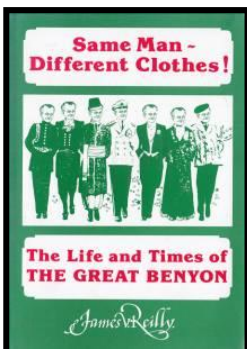
In 1969 the *Variety Artists Club (VAC)* named their new lifetime achievement award after him and made Edgar and Doris the first recipient. Then the *Brotherhood of Auckland Magicians (BAM)* presented him with their new *Grand Master of Magic Award*.

On 25th April 1971 Edgar was presented to Her Royal Highness Princess Alexandra after performing in *A Night To Remember*, the *Auckland Centennial* command concert at the *St. James Theatre*. Doris Benyon was granted a Scroll of Honour in 1974 by the VAC.

By now Edgar was working around 100 schools a show, mainly for charity; he only took a percentage to cover costs and travel. After a series of severe illnesses, Edgar and Doris moved to Queensland to live with Sean and Evelyn. Edgar usually returned to New Zealand for the VAC Benny awards, the club meant so much to the Benyons.



On 14 September 1978 the *Great Benyon* took his last bow at the age of 77 and Doris followed 14 years later, on 31 May 1992 during her 94th year. A memorial service led by Stan Goudge was held at the *Methodist Church* in Queen Street. Stan performed the *Broken Wand* ceremony then they all headed off to the nearby *Back Stage Club* for drinks.



In 1992 Evelyn was a passenger on a bus that was hit by a car and suffered injuries that made walking and writing difficult. At that time she was partner in a furniture business. She passed on in 2012.

In the author's notes for his 1992 biography of Edgar Benyon *Same Man ~ Different Clothes!* Jim Reilly wrote, 'I'm not sure how all this came about, writing a book was never one of my ambitions, but somehow it has happened.' Jim edited the iconic *Magicana Magazine* for yonks (1980 – 2000)!

Beynon/Benyon Family Tree

