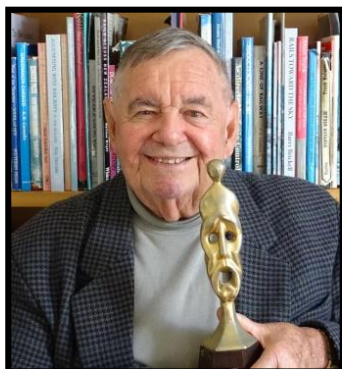


# Merv Smith QSM

11 March 1933 - 24 Sept 2018

Good Morning, God bless and have a happy day!



**Mervyn Charles Smith** was born on 11 March 1933 at *Te Kuiti Hospital* to Adelaide (b. Bunting) and George Smith. George was telegraph operator at Pio Pio until he was transferred 18 months later to join the communications department for *NZ Post & Telegraph* in Auckland. During *WW2* he was directed to teach morse code to the Pacific coast watchers, a task he was later to regret as many of his students were captured, killed or died of tropical diseases. In 1942 the Smiths adopted a 10 year old daughter Valerie who was a year older than Merv. Adelaide was delighted to help the war effort and the family's income by working in a shoe factory in Eden Terrace.

At age 6 Merv attended the *Belmont Primary School* then became a pioneer pupil at *Avondale Intermediate* before going on to *Avondale Technical High School* which had recently been converted from an American marine hospital. Merv was not sporty but excelled in English, delighted in reading and writing and became the class clown. His hobbies were collecting *Hornby* model trains and *Meccano* construction sets.

Merv and his sister took dance lessons and he studied elocution, doing well in the Auckland speech competitions. After performing Stanley Holloway monologues and a skit involving 8 different accents and characters, he was invited on the *Jack Rielly Show* at the *St James Theatre*. Merv and Valerie developed a number of comedy-singing acts over the years and sang together in the *Friendly Road Children's Choir* until his voice broke.

He left school in 1949 with his school certificate and joined the *Charles Haines Advertising Agency* as an office boy. Two years later he became a cadet in the copy department of *1ZB*, scheduling adverts and eventually working the evening shift as a trainee radio announcer. After six months in Auckland he was sent to relieve at Whangarei's *Radio 1XN* for a six weeks break but when management decided to send him to Hamilton, Merv spat the dummy and quit.

He found employment as a copywriter at *Maple Furnishing* for 3 years, became the voice of *Maple* on their radio adverts, then joined the *Jacka-Brown Advertising Agency* for a year. Merv compered the *Digger's Concert Party* at defence camps and he and Valerie toured the districts performing in charity concerts. From 1954 to 1957 Merv was a regular on Barry Linehan's *Radio Roadhouse Show* then in 1958 he was restored to *1XN* Whangarei for 2 years.



Back in Auckland Merv was in the right place at the right time when *1ZB's Morning Show* host Buzz Perkins had a run-in with the program director over scheduled play lists and resigned in 1961. Buzz had done the hard work, fighting management to be allowed to introduce comedy, popular music and upbeat interviews into his shows. Breakfast radio suited Merv and he soon became Auckland's reigning cereal king with freedom to follow other interests such as emceeing shows, talent quests and dances; performing radio plays; recording books for the blind and producing character voices for adverts. Benny recipient Mary Thrall was able to find plenty of work for him and John Maybury often had Merv working at the *Auckland Easter Show*.

Merv already had television experience, having won the *Mr. Television* competition at the *Auckland Birthday Carnival* at *Western Springs* in 1957. When television transmission began in Auckland on in 1960 he was able to do some continuity work and news and weather reporting.

Commercial broadcasts began on *AKTV2* the next year and the *NZBC* came into existence in 1962. Merv hosted the first variety series called *The Time, the Place and the Morrisons*, presenting the *Howard Morrison Quartet*, the *Crombie Murdoch Quartet* and guest stars.

In 1966 he hosted *Festival Revue 66* with a host of talent including Max Cryer, The Convairs, *The Kini Quartet* and Lee Grant. Merv appeared on all of the 24 hour *Telethons*, raising money for charity organisations. He also starred on the panel of *TV2's Personality Squares*, hosted by Les Andrews, then became the voiceless *Bobo the Clown* on a series of junior programs and bowed out from reading the news when he began his live breakfast cereal commercials, directed by magician Wayne Rogers. In 1986 he interviewed another Benny Recipient, Marcus Craig, live on the *TV2 Tonight Show*.



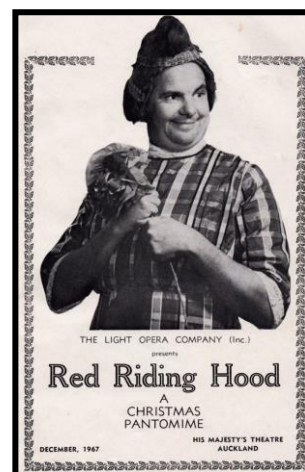
Getting up at 3.45am to begin work on *The Early Bird Show* can't have been easy 5 days a week but Merv managed on a diet of instant coffee and adrenalin managing to keep sounding sincere and cheerful. His show gathered a rating of 47% (that's a quarter of a million listeners) compared to *Radio Hauraki* at 21%. He relied on his huge stack of gag books and the joke page from the *Sydney Daily Mirror*. (What's yellow and sweet and swings from trees? Tarzipan!) His zany characters became household names; *McHairy the Scottish spider*, *Stuffy van der Merv*, *Clarrie the Caretaker*, *Earl the Snake* and *Fortescue Frog*. Plus his train whistle, the *School Bell* and his *Useless History* slot – facts that don't really matter. His *Friday Nights* program ran live from 6pm to 8.30 with a formula of pop music, competitions,

interviews and Merv's *Hugo Ruffleigh* cloak & dagger series.

In 1974 the Smiths sold the family car and took 5 months off to ride the rails on many famous trains such as the *Indian-Pacific* from Sydney to Perth over the Nullarbor desert, *The Trans-Siberian* across Russia and sightseeing trips through Europe, South Africa, Japan, Fiji and Hong Kong.

He performed in many musicals with the *Auckland Operatic Society*, including *Kismet* (1970), *White Horse Inn* (1958), *Where's Charlie*, *The Mikado* in Whangarei, *The Last of the Red Hot Lovers* (1981) at the *New Independent Theatre* and Roger Hall's *Hot Water* at the *Mercury Theatre* (1982).

In 1986 Merv was involved with a production called *The B Side* which won *Best Commercial Station Entertainment Program*. The same year he and Gray Bartlett produced a record for Father's Day called *My Dad* which sold well.



*In your own quiet way you walked tall,  
With a sort of proud calm about you.  
What was right was right, and that was all.*

On 27 January 1987 Merv followed former *1ZB* nine to noon host Alice Worsley to *Radio I* taking his news reader Bob Leahy with him. 'I had got fed up with the continually growing paper work, operational procedures and tampering and I was aggrieved at the way that they had treated Alice.' Sadly he had to leave *McHairy* his Scottish spider behind but created a new Irish character, *Paddy Longlegs*. Merv loved working at *Radio i92FM*, which treated him very well, surprising him with a series of bonus cheques for his high ratings. All went well until the station fell into the hands of Ron Brierley in 1990 and Merv moved to *Radio Pacific*.



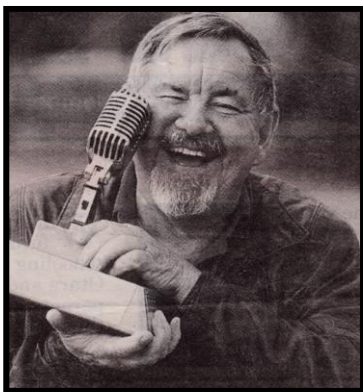
In 1991 he accepted a huge salary drop to become a director and announcer on the *FM Country Radio* station, broadcasting from Albany, but poor advertising revenue saw the station close in 1993 and he returned to *Radio Pacific* working Sundays. His long time friends Alice Worsley, Keith Bracey, Don Linden, Sonia & Les Andrews and Alma Woods gate crashed Merv's 60<sup>th</sup> birthday party to surprise him with a radio version of *This is Your Life*, broadcast on *FM Country*.





In 1999 Merv partnered with Lawyer and property developer Guy Herbert to create *Merv Smith's World of Trains*, initially at *Heritage Park* in Mt Wellington then at *Monterey Park Motor Museum and Model World* beside the Hobsonville bridge. Poor attendance and problems with the landlord saw the business fold 3 years later. Two other projects that he worked on with Guy were the *Thomas the Tank Engine* trackless ride-on train and Merv Smith's *Hobby Shop* 'for men, women and lucky children'. Merv found store work boring compared to show business and eventually retired.

Over the years he had a close association with *Motat*, building scenery for their model railway. A project that never got off the ground was the creation of a working radio station on site at the museum. In 1985 he hosted a television program called *Main Trunk Line* documenting the journey of a steam train from Auckland to Wellington to celebrate the centenary of an agreement with local Maori to allow railway access through the King Country. Between 1993 and 1999 he narrated a number of programs on model railways, steam trains and trams.



He has published three books; *You've Got to Be Joking* (1972), *You Can't Help Laughing* (1973) and *Little Trains of Thought* (1977), which reached #5 on NZ list of best sellers. He also wrote a regular newspaper column for a while and when last questioned he was still writing his 1990 biography. His interview on *National Radio's Spectrum* was aired in 2013.

Merv was voted top talking-book narrator for the *Blind Foundation* three times and recorded a copy of Edgar Benyon's biography for Jon Zealando. He has also been honoured with a *Mobil Top Radio Personality Award*, a 1985 *Toastmasters Club Excellence Award*, the 1976 *VAC Benny* and a *Queen's Service Medal* in 1985.

Since 1999 Merv has appeared in a number of films and television series including *Buzz and Poppy* (1999), *Her Majesty* (2001), *Shortland Street* (1999), *Xena: Warrior Princess* (1996), *Buzzy Bee and Friends* (2009–13), *Letter to Blanchy* (1994) and *The Hobbit* (2014). He also acted in *Lord of the Rings* and *Sleeping Dogs* but his efforts ended up on the cutting room floor.

**Gillian Smith MNZM:** Harry Young's large family emigrated from Kent in England where he had been a butcher. He took his brood to Hamilton to be a school gardener but changed his mind and moved them back to Auckland a month later. 21 year old Gillian Young met Merv when he was in the *Young New Zealanders Club* and initially found him brash but eventually warmed to him and they married in 1959, enjoying a long courtship journeying back and forward between Auckland to Whangarei every weekend. After a year in the North they settled in Auckland where they produced two sons, Lloyd and Terence. Gill is a volunteer, heavily involved in *Plunket*, the *Civilian Maimed Association* (president of their West Auckland branch), *St Johns Ambulance* and *Communicare*. Is it any wonder that Gillian Smith received a *MNZM* in 1998? Merv and Gill have a grandson and 3 granddaughters. Merv died on 24 September 2018.

