

Excerpts from  
**ON THE ROOFTOP WITH BILL SEARS**  
*A one-man play based on the life and writings of William Sears*  
*(1911-1992)*

by  
Mark Perry

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## ON THE ROOFTOP WITH BILL SEARS

*The set is a 1950s TV studio, which is actually a converted radio studio. This is one of seven such studios at WCAU-TV in downtown Philadelphia. The studio is dimly lit at first with some light on stage right, where we see the set of a park scene. There is a tree and a bench covered by a cloth. On a chalkboard is written the title, "In the Park with Bill Sears." At stage left, apart from the set and still in darkness, there is a make-shift dressing area with a mirror. A kitchen area is offstage left. A sound room is upstage. A clothes-line hangs conspicuously with still portraits of WCAU personalities and programs clipped to it.*

### **Excerpt #1, pp. 1-3 (opening)**

*BILL appears at the door. He is a middle-aged man, made up to look like an old man. He speaks to someone offstage.*

BILL

Good show today, Paul. No, go ahead, I'll get the lights.

*[Bill comes in, full of snap. He wears striped pants, a flat gray coat, a light checkered vest, and a string tie. He stops.]*

I love that hush, the quiet of a dark theater... or a TV or radio studio, as the case may be. It's a silence that vibrates with anticipation, every atom poised to bring into being whatever one might fancy. You could say, let's go back to the Renaissance, to Spain, to Seville... or to Rome of the 1<sup>st</sup> Century, or Judea, or east to the Orient and points yet unknown. You could call up stories of people long gone. You could bring a man back from the dead. Yes! You can bring a man back from the dead, let him live again, let something of his essence mingle in our midst for a while, so you might enjoy his company, gain from his experience. All you have to do is ask, and this hush – this pure soil for the cultivation of the soul – it responds. And for a span of time, you can forget that it's 1953 and that you're in Philadelphia.

*[He turns on the lights.]*

You remember that joke. “I entered a contest once. First prize was a week in Philadelphia. Second prize: two weeks in Philadelphia.” WCAU, a 7 studio house broadcasting radio and television. Let’s see what we got on.

*[He turns on a speaker monitor and we hear music.]*

Ah, Guy Lombardo. Must be Stu in the booth – he loves the old sugar-stick.

*[He turns down the music, when he discovers a cup of coffee and a donut by his dressing table. There’s an envelope next to them.]*

Oh, isn’t that nice? Coffee with cream and (*sniffs*) two sugars. And a honey-glazed. Heaven. And a letter. (*He picks it up and sniffs it.*) It’s a contract. (*He shakes it next to his ear.*) To renew the show for another year. Boss shows me into his office the other day: “Sears, Television is big, very big, and it’s getting bigger. The CBS people, they’re happy, very happy with your show. Stick with us, Bill, and you’ll be a star.” And now they’re offering me... (*Listens carefully to letter.*) Forty-five? No. (*He weighs it in his hands.*) Fifty! \$50,000. (*He sighs.*) Sounds... delicious. Just one problem. Every story has to have one. So too in our lives.

*[The number ‘16’ is written prominently on his dressing mirror. He wipes it away and writes ‘17’ in its place.]*

I’m calling it “The Divine Dilemma.” And today is Day 17. (*Talking to God.*) Only 2 days left. Beyond that, my conscience is clean. (*To audience.*) How do I put this...? I have a friend – works here at WCAU – who suspects that Jesus Christ has returned, and is wondering what to do about it. The answer is obvious, right? Christ hasn’t returned, because when He comes, everyone is going to know it. That’s how we know He’s come, all the noise, the fire with the angels singing, horns blowing. Right. (*He shakes his head as if he’s in complete agreement with that.*) But... my friend still suspects it anyway, and claims to have some proof. Good proof. Great proof... except for the angels, the horns

and the universal cataclysm. What would you do? Really, I'm not saying you have to buy it. Just, given that point of view, what would you advise? Should my friend give up a good livelihood and fame to share this message? Because no one knows about it. Just like the first time He came – my friend says – when only twelve believed in Him, and He sent them out into the world saying, go out and share the Gospel with all nations.

*[He picks up the contract letter.]*

My friend really loves his job.

### **Excerpt #2, pp. 5-8 (early childhood)**

I was born in Duluth, Minnesota on March 28, 1911. Sometimes I wonder if Father never forgave me for missing Saint Patrick's Day by less than two weeks. I was born in a caul. Wrapped in a veil, my father said. My Uncle Duffy was more picturesque. "Jesus, Mary, and Joseph, and all the saints in purgatory! The laddie's come in a cocoon."

I began to walk when I was ten months old, but I began to speak when I was only six months. It made my father very nervous. Especially since the first word I said was not, "Daddy" but "God". Apparently, I heard it a lot around the house, generally followed by language somewhat less religious in character.

By the time I was a year-and-a-half old, my father was quite frightened of me. I knew several words that he didn't. It was at this time that I first had the dream. When I told Mother about my dream she told Father. He wanted to take me to a doctor, but Mother said, "He's just precocious."

"He's weird," Father told her.

All I could recall myself about the dream the first time I had it was that the room had been full of a wonderful bright light, that I was very happy, and that I wanted to remain there. September 20, 1912. Mother said she remembered the day of my dream very clearly. It was the morning that Father came downstairs after being desperately ill. He'd eaten some string beans from a bad jar and had been poisoned. For three days he thought he was going to die. At the height of his fever he confessed to Mother that ten years ago when they had first been married he'd taken Alma Jensen to a barn dance, and he didn't want to die with that on his conscience. Unfortunately for him, he recovered.

By the time I was five I was making my poor father's life a misery. I just had all these questions: Why was the sky blue? Where did a laugh go after you heard it? If the earth was round and people were walking on all sides of it, which side was up? Why was Sammy Agnew black and why was I white – most of the time? Did God have a wife? Where was His house? Could He speak Chippewa Indians like Uncle Walter? Did He really love everybody? Even old lady Yellow-jacket who chased us kids with her umbrella? Why did He make mosquitoes? And flies that could walk upside down on the ceiling? The big questions really unnerved my father. I seemed to have an inordinate interest in God, and he didn't care to discuss it with me.

One day at the circus, while the bare-back riders were galloping through the big rings of fire, I turned to Father and said suddenly, "Is that what hell is like?"

Father nearly swallowed his cigar. "Don't ask me, I've lived all my life in Minnesota."

"Where does *God* live, Father? How big is He? Does He have brown eyes?"

We left the tent immediately. Father stopped at a side-show and bought me a rubber ball.

"Here," he said, "play ball. Be like the other little boys. Bounce the ball on the ground."

I did, obediently. Then I looked up at him proudly. "God made the ground."

About a month later, according to Mother, I had the dream a second time. I didn't say anything about it until my father came home from work.

"The man came again," I said.

"Who came?" Father laughed.

"The man."

"What man?"

"The man in light."

"Where?"

"In my dream again."

"Ethel!" Father called, "He's at it again."

Mother came hurrying in. "What's wrong?"

Father was already putting on his coat. "He's seen that man in a light in his dream again."

Mother picked me up tenderly and kissed me. "Of course, he has." She hugged me to her. "We all have nasty bad dreams."

"It was a good dream," I told her.

"What did the man look like?"

"I don't know."

"What did he say?"

"Don't follow in their footsteps."

The very next morning Father was shaving when I came into the bathroom.

"What's my name?" I asked him.

Father had often played this game with me. "Your name is William."

"Then why did he call me Peter?" "

"Who?"

"The man in my dream last night."

Father cut his chin. "Ethel!"

Mother was very patient about it. "Are you sure he called you Peter, dear?"

I nodded. "He said: 'Fish like Peter.'"

Father went to work that morning with his face half shaved. "It's not normal. He talks like an old man. He'll be dead before he's six." Whenever my father became upset he talked with a brogue and waxed poetic. "If I'd known what was coming that dark March night, I'd have stuffed him back into the 'caul' and returned him."

They say there's an age when the child looks to its father, looks into his eyes, searching for unconditional acceptance. There's a window of time and if the child doesn't find it, that window closes, and the boy has to go elsewhere for that acceptance.

### **Excerpt #3, pp. 8-11 (Grandfather)**

One night I had exactly the same dream again. Only this time I was old enough to remember it clearly. So I wrote it down, all about the beautiful shiny white figure that came to me and brought a peace and rapture such as words can never describe.

I decided that I'd better go and tell my grandfather about my dream. Grandfather didn't always know the answers, but he always let me ask questions. I found Grandfather inside his barn singing at the top of his lungs:

(Sings.)            "There'll be pie in the sky when we die,  
                          When we die there'll be pie in the sky;  
                          So live every day 'till you die.  
                          And you'll all have your pie in the sky."

I told him about my dream. I asked him if he'd ever seen anything like that. He said no, but he wished he had.

I asked him, "Why is it, Grandfather, that it's so easy to talk to you about God? Here I am a young boy and there you are an old man. We both like it but nobody else seems to want to. "Maybe it's because I am old and you're young. You're close to God on one end, and I'm close to Him on the other. In between, they don't care so much."

I once heard our neighbor Mrs. Casey say Grandfather would never see the inside of the pearly gates. I knew that if you missed church on Sunday it was a mortal sin and you were damned into hell fire forever. I figured it out. Grandfather had missed over three thousand times. I wasn't interested in going to heaven at all if Grandfather wasn't there.

One Sunday I skipped church and took a chance on mortal sin. I went with Grandfather in his buggy down by the Mississippi River. There'd been a bad storm, and all the people who lived along the flats had been flooded out. Grandfather was helping to rescue their things. We worked until very late in the afternoon. When we came back Grandfather got a tongue-lashing from Grandma, and I was sent upstairs to bed until Father came home to deal with me.

I knew right away that this wouldn't be a "man-to-man talk, or a light willow switch, this was a razor-strapper. Father swung his razor-strap as though he were chopping wood. What was even worse, was the way he walked up the stairs. His feet could play on stairs with more feeling than Mr. Tilley on the church organ on Sunday.

"Let's get it over with," he said.

"Yes, sir."

"This hurts me a lot worse than it does you."

"But not in the same place."

That got me a few extra strokes.

I went down to join Grandfather at the barn. He was sitting on the oats-box.

"Have a seat, son," he said.

I shook my head. "Not just yet."

Grandfather nodded sympathetically. "You're thinking that if you'd lied about where we'd been this afternoon you'd have a more comfortable seat on your breeches right now, right?"

I nodded.

Grandfather laughed. "Better to be miserable on the bottom end and proud of yourself on the top end," he told me. "That's character. Forget your rump. You did a good thing helping those people at the river."

Grandfather got me a soft cushion out of the buggy. I settled into it very carefully. I liked being with Grandfather. I liked the smell of his clothes, his wrinkled cheeks with those short, sharp whiskers that scratched when he hugged me.

Before I went home that night Grandfather told me, "Never stop asking questions." Then he made me promise, cross my heart and hope to die, that I wouldn't stop. "There must be something better somewhere than what we've got so far. Some day you'll find out what your dream means. I hope I'm around when you do. I've been looking for something myself, for all my years."

Inside the barn was a world that belonged only to me and Grandfather. That world inspired this show. And now in a way we're opening it up to all these other people. We changed it around a bit. Instead of a barn, we have a park. I play the old man. The boy became Albert the chipmunk. We added some other animal puppets like Sir Geoffrey the Giraffe and Magnolia the Ostrich here. And now every Sunday, at 12 noon, the animals and I are transformed into electromagnetic radiation and beamed abroad to CBS television stations all across this nation. I imagine it to be like grandfather's barn stretching out over the whole country, and all are welcome, and no question will go... unspoken.

**Excerpt #4, pp. 19-20 (On the Rooftop)**

*[He starts moving around pieces of furniture and scenery, trying to depict what he is describing.]*

There's this image I have stuck in my head. A figure on the rooftop, silhouetted in moonlight, arms outstretched, and waiting... You see, I wasn't the only fool who dreamed that Christ would return. Oh, no, this was a reverie that many a believer has been caught up in. Remember the Great Disappointment from history class? Long before the Depression. 1844. That was the year He was supposed to come back.

*[He gestures towards the “Christ returns” on the chalkboard.]*

All the signs were there; the prophecies seemed to line right up. A guy named... Miller – William Miller – Upstate New York, late 1820s, discovers that the 2300 day prophecy in Daniel 8 is about to run out. Jesus was about to return. He was convinced. So what do you do? The end of the world is coming and people are going around worrying about – I don’t know – hair pins and wagon wheels. So Miller did what we would probably do – he kept it pretty much to himself. He was no preacher! But his conscience plagued him. Finally he broke down and begged God for help: If you want me to share this teaching, show me a sign. Within half an hour, his nephew shows up and says, Uncle, our church wants you to preach next Sunday on the Second Coming. Understandably he was... Furious! But he preached anyway. Before long, one in seventeen Americans becomes a Millerite.

1844 comes, and they work out a particular month and day. That night arrives. We’re out there on the roof of a house we’ve just signed the deed over to our more skeptical relations who are inside. But no need for such possessions in the land of bliss. We’re wearing our Sunday best. On the rooftop, calling out: “Jesus! Jesus! Take me now, Jesus! I’m ready for you!” and so on through the night on the roof with the waves of faith coming and going.

We feel at one moment that through the concentrated power of our faith that we alone can cause the moon to turn to blood and the stars to fall from heaven. He said with the faith of a mustard seed we could cause the mountain to move but with the flourishing tree of faith firmly rooted in our hearts we feel at that moment that this, the moon is about to

break in two and the stars will fall and that our Lord will emerge resplendent, glorious, and dismissive of our skeptical relations inside playing cards. Concentrating. The moon about to break... to break. Break! BREAK!

The silence from heaven was deafening. “Jesus? The world of the faithful awaits you! We stand here trying to keep our balance, to keep from falling. The roof is pitched, Jesus--”

How long can we stay on the roof? How long before we have to swallow our certitude and go back inside?

This is the end of these excerpts, but this is only a portion of the play! If you are interested in purchasing a copy of the script in its entirety, or in performing this play, please contact:

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