

# A LIFETIME *of* LAU



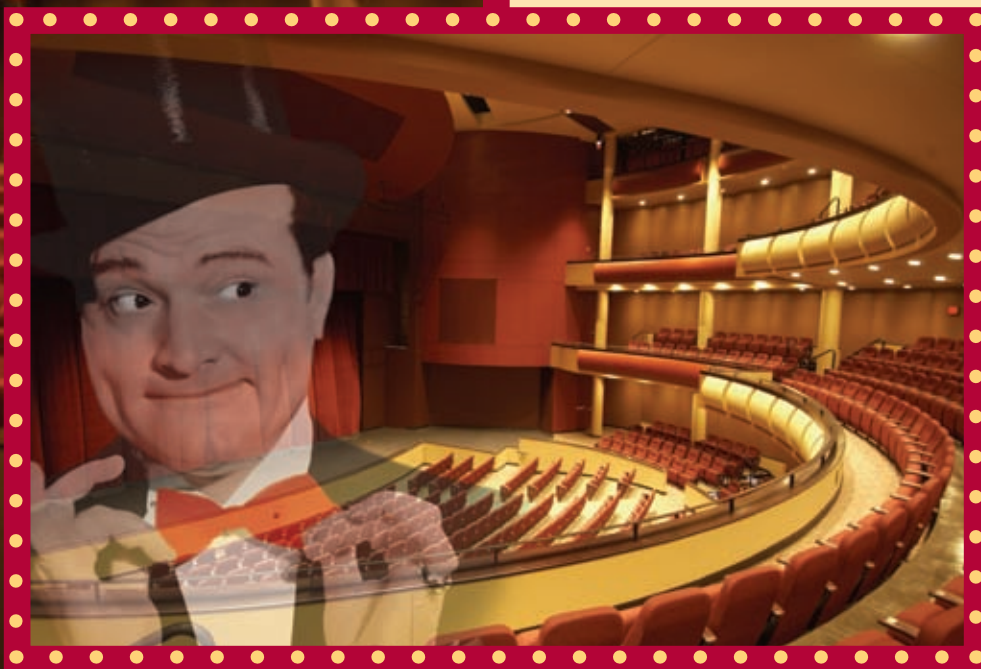
Phillip M. Summers, on the stage of the Red Skelton Performing Arts Center, is attempting to complete the facility with a Red Skelton Museum.

SUMMERS, KEVIN O. MOONEY /  
PHOTO ILLUSTRATION (INSET),  
DAVID FISHER

By Laura Lane

# GHETER

PHILLIP M. SUMMERS, PRESIDENT emeritus of Vincennes University, has maintained his Indiana University connections since receiving a bachelor's and master's degree in the 1960s. Now retired from VU, where he still maintains an office, Summers commutes to Bloomington twice a week to teach an introductory psychology class. He is famous for his ability to learn the names of all of his students, hundreds of them. He has been selected as the best instructor on campus, and in 1996 received IU's Distinguished Alumni Service Award. He is now engaged in a campaign to preserve the legacy of legendary Hoosier performer Red Skelton.



RICHARD SKELTON'S CONTRACT INSTRUCTED THAT HE WAS TO BE INTRODUCED TO AUDIENCES WITH JUST FOUR WORDS. "ONE OF AMERICA'S CLOWNS." THEN, HIS NAME. "**RED SKELTON.**"

**B**EFORE HE BECAME THE WACKY AND FAMOUS comedian Red Skelton, 9-year-old Richard Skelton worked after school helping to support his widowed mother and three older brothers by buying newspapers for one and a half cents and selling them for twice that at the corner of Fifth and Main streets in Vincennes, Ind.

One afternoon in the early 1920s, he encountered vaudeville performer Ed Wynn outside the Pantheon Theater, a historic site now undergoing restoration. The red-haired boy didn't know who this man was, and he asked Wynn about the upcoming show.

Wynn explained there would be a night of entertainment and laughter to lighten people's lives, make them smile.

"That's what I'm going to do when I get older," Skelton told him. "Make people laugh."

Wynn took three papers, paid Skelton \$1, and invited him to the show that night for free. When young Richard got home, he gave his mother the dollar and told her the story.

"She gave me a dime — a nickel for popcorn and a nickel for car fare home," Skelton recalled in a televised interview.

When a security guard tried to shoo him away from the theater's backstage area during intermission, Wynn said to let the boy come on back. Skelton got his first look at an audience.

"He held me up to the asbestos curtain," Skelton told a Canadian television talk show host 70 years later, in 1992. "I saw the audience coming back in. I fell in love with them."

And people loved Skelton back.

He transitioned from radio to vaudeville theater to movies to a 20-year network television variety show that America tuned into for the antics of characters such as Clem Kadiddlehopper, Freddie the Freeloader, and a lawman called Sheriff Deadeye.



Red Skelton was born in this modest house on Lyndale Avenue in Vincennes, Ind.

KEVIN O. MOONEY

His fan base was particularly strong in southwestern Indiana, where Skelton had grown up without a father.

"In Vincennes, he was a favored son," says Phillip Summers, BS'60, MS'63, who retired in 2001 after two decades as president of Vincennes University. "When he would come back here, he would wander the streets and go into shops like anybody else."

Summers's family got its first television set when he was a high school senior. Before that, like most Americans, they gathered around the radio in the evenings for news and entertainment. *The Red Skelton Show*, syndicated around the country, was a highlight in the Summers home.

"My family used to sit on Sunday evening and 'watch' the radio between 7 and 9 o'clock," Summers recalls. "This was something we all looked forward to. Everyone listened to *The Red Skelton Show*."

A 1939 ad in the Vincennes *Sun-Commercial* harkened Red Skelton's return to his hometown for five shows, all to be performed on Feb. 19.

"Red comes home today to appear in person on our stage," the ad said. "Let's give Red a real welcome and grand homecoming."

Tickets ranged from 10 to 40 cents.

Growing up in Washington, Ind., just 20 miles or so from Vincennes, Summers knew Skelton's rags-to-riches story, how he escaped the North End neighborhood in Vincennes, traveling around the country by the time he was 15 with vaudeville and what back then were called "medicine shows."

In the years to come, Skelton would star in 30 movies and become friends with great comics like Bob Hope, LHD'74, and Mickey Rooney. He won Emmy awards for best writing and best comedian, a Golden Globe Award, and the Cecil B. DeMille Award for contributions to the world of entertainment.

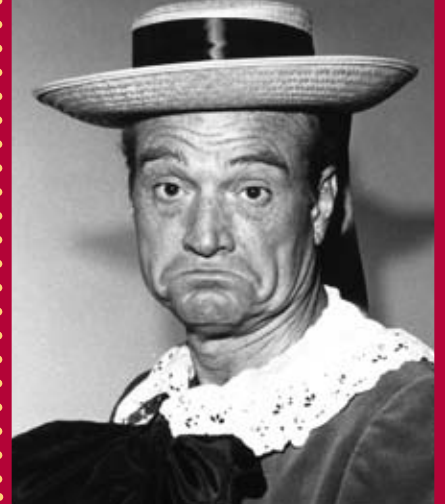
When Summers was president of Vincennes University, he oversaw construction projects on campus — at least one every year — to sustain and grow the university's role as an institution of higher learning that anchors the city.

So it makes sense that Summers, upon retirement, kept his presence on campus and became the impetus, the driving force that helped build the Red Skelton Performing Arts Center, dedicated in Febru-

Red Skelton as Clem Kadiddlehopper



Red Skelton as Junior, the "mean widdle kid"



Red Skelton, as Freddie the Freeloader, and Ed Wynn



COURTESY PHOTOS



**Red Skelton waves the IU banner at Homecoming in 1980. Above, Phil Summers and Skelton's widow, Lothian, examine photos.**



**The Red Skelton Performing Arts Center is located on the Vincennes University campus. The front, left portion of the building is the shell that will house a Red Skelton museum.**

ary 2006 after a decade of fundraising and construction.

"I am president of the Red Skelton Museum Foundation," he states proudly.

The performing arts and education center received an \$18 million funding boost from state coffers with lots of support from John Gregg, BA'76, JD'84, who represented the Vincennes area in the General Assembly for years.

The 63,000-square-foot structure features classroom space, a set/scenery workshop that's two stories high, and an auditorium with a stage the size of the one at the IU Auditorium. But there's one missing component, one close to Summers's heart.

It's the museum, a place to showcase Skelton's career, his zany life and times. Summers is confident the community and people who loved Red Skelton will come through with funding to complete the dream.

"Within two years' time, I hope it will be open," he said, standing on the cement floor in the 5,000-square-foot shell. It is connected to the performing arts center by a door, and under Summers's leadership, it will be transformed into a museum.

Even in these tough economic times, Summers can close his eyes and see Skelton's life-sized clown paintings on the walls, hear him cracking up in the middle of a Clem Kadiddlehopper skit playing on a screen in one corner of the museum.

He envisions 80-year-old fans and children knee-high walking through a wardrobe room where dozens of Skelton costumes hang on clothing racks and tubes of primary-colored clown makeup litter a table facing a mirror.

**"I MISS MY WIFE'S COOKING. EVERY CHANCE I GET."**  
— Red Skelton

Summers wants the people of Vincennes to remember their famous hometown clown and preserve the heritage of a man who rose from poverty to great wealth and fame.

Keeping people laughing all the while.

And as Red Skelton made good of his life, so can others of limited means. Summers said it's Skelton's deep love of family, faith, and country that serves as an inspiration to the people of Vincennes.

So Summers will continue to oversee the creation of the Red Skelton Museum, keeping watch over an eclectic array of memorabilia. There are three Freddie the Freeloader costumes (heavy wool pants, a scarf with weights on the ends, a whisk broom tucked inside a pocket, that red vest and bandana), dozens of pairs of funny glasses (10 pairs with banana noses, three with hairy eyebrows, two with giant honking noses, one with a golf-ball nose, and one lobster-claw nose), 130 pairs of magnifying reading glasses (these were not props — Skelton had poor eyesight and kept losing and then finding his reading glasses), and a big plastic doll in an

enamel bathtub (for Skelton's "throw the baby out with the bathwater" skit).

When Summers first met Skelton decades after getting to know him on radio and television, he thought he knew all there was to know about the man, this clown known all around the country. It turns out that Skelton was so much more than one of America's clowns. He was a painter (albeit of clowns), a composer, a nomad, a movie star, a television icon.

And a collector of all things.

"Let's just say he was a keeper," Summers says. "He didn't throw much away."

Skelton wrote love letters every morning to his second wife, Georgia. He also would write a comedy sketch and jot down a novel idea, a melody for a song, and a sketch for a painting. These things, too, are part of the Skelton collection.

"When we got these, I knew immediately what we had, because he had told that story about how he started each day," Summers says.

When he met Skelton that first time,

Summers was captivated by this person who, even as an old man, could keep people laughing during an early morning breakfast meeting.

"He was a comedian at 8 a.m.," Summers recalls.

When Skelton died in September of 1997, Summers was Vincennes University's president. He hatched an idea about the performing arts center, at that time just architectural drawings.

"I asked our board of trustees to name the proposed theater the Red Skelton Theater to honor him and to tell the story about his being born in poverty here in Vincennes and then going on to international fame, all on his own," he says.

Skelton's widow, Lothian, donated his life's collection to the museum planned in Skelton's hometown.

"Mrs. Skelton donated millions of dollars worth of things to us. She felt strongly that his things should come home to Indiana," Summers says, giving a tour of locked and temperature-controlled rooms stacked high with Skelton show scripts, artwork, and collections. "It's important to preserve

## FILMOGRAPHY

### FEATURES

- **Having Wonderful Time** (1938)
- **Flight Command** (1940)
- **The People vs. Dr. Kildare** (1941)
- **Whistling in the Dark** (1941)
- **Dr. Kildare's Wedding Day** (1941)
- **Lady Be Good** (1941)
- **Ship Ahoy** (1942)
- **Maisie Gets Her Man** (1942)
- **Panama Hattie** (1942)
- **Whistling in Dixie** (1942)
- **DuBarry Was a Lady** (1943)
- **Thousands Cheer** (1943)
- **I Dood It** (1943)
- **Whistling in Brooklyn** (1943)
- **Bathing Beauty** (1944)
- **Ziegfeld Follies** (1946)

- **The Show-Off** (1946)
- **Merton of the Movies** (1947)
- **The Fuller Brush Man** (1948)
- **A Southern Yankee** (1948)
- **Neptune's Daughter** (1949)
- **The Yellow Cab Man** (1950)
- **Three Little Words** (1950)
- **Duchess of Idaho** (1950)
- **The Fuller Brush Girl** (1950) (cameo)
- **Watch the Birdie** (1950)
- **Excuse My Dust** (1951)
- **Texas Carnival** (1951)
- **Lovely to Look At** (1952)
- **The Clown** (1953)
- **Half a Hero** (1953)
- **The Great Diamond Robbery** (1953)

- **Susan Slept Here** (1954)
- **Around the World in Eighty Days** (1956)
- **Public Pigeon No. One** (1957)
- **Ocean's Eleven** (1960)
- **Those Magnificent Men in Their Flying Machines** (1965)
- **Rudolph's Shiny New Year** (1976)

### SHORT SUBJECTS

- **The Broadway Buckaroo** (1939)
- **Seeing Red** (1939)
- **Radio Bugs** (1944) (voice)
- **Weekend in Hollywood** (1947)
- **The Luckiest Guy in the World** (1947) (voice)
- **Some of the Best** (1949)

## RED SKELTON'S PLEDGE OF ALLEGIANCE

The late Red Skelton related the story of his teacher, Mr. Laswell, who felt his students had come to think of the Pledge of Allegiance as merely something to recite in class. Skelton repeated it in many of his performances.



"I've been listening to you boys and girls recite the Pledge of Allegiance all semester and it seems as though it is becoming monotonous to you. If I may, may I recite it and try to explain to you the meaning of each word?"

*I* — me, an individual, a committee of one.

*Pledge* — dedicate all of my worldly goods to give without self pity.

*Allegiance* — my love and my devotion.

*To the flag* — our standard, Old Glory, a symbol of freedom. Wherever she waves, there's respect because your loyalty has given her a dignity that shouts freedom is everybody's job!

*United* — that means that we have all come together.

*States* — individual communities that have united into 48 great states.

Forty-eight individual communities with pride and dignity and purpose; all divided with imaginary boundaries, yet united to a common purpose, and that's love for country.

*And to the republic* — a state in which sovereign power is invested in representatives chosen by the people to govern. And government is the people and it's from the people to the leaders, not from the leaders to the people. *For which it stands,*

*One nation* — one nation, meaning "so blessed by God."

*Indivisible* — incapable of being divided.

*With liberty* — which is freedom — the right of power to live one's own life without threats, fear, or some sort of retaliation.

*And Justice* — the principle or quality of dealing fairly with others.

*For all* — which means, boys and girls, it's as much your country as it is mine.

Since I was a small boy, two states have been added to our country and two words have been added to the pledge of Allegiance ...

**UNDER GOD**

Wouldn't it be a pity if someone said that is a prayer and that would be eliminated from schools, too?

his heritage, and we have it all here."

Summers secured some rooms on campus for storage, and the first of the collection arrived from Palm Springs, Calif., in 2000. More came by truck the next year.

And to help complete the picture, Vincennes University two years ago bought the modest house at 111 W. Lyndale St. where Skelton was born in 1913, two months after his shopkeeper father — who had been a circus clown — died. His mother cleaned houses to support four sons.

"We believe he was born in that bedroom with the screened door from the porch. Two midwives came," Summers says, pointing across the university grounds.

Look out a windowed wall of the performing arts center, across the street, and you are facing the front door.

Skelton's influence stretches far beyond the building gracing the Vincennes University campus. In the 1960s, he came back to town for a benefit show at Lincoln High School's Adams Coliseum. Proceeds went to establish a children's Christmas clothing fund.

"He sent a check every year to keep it alive," Summers says.

More than 40 years later, the program continues to provide clothes to children who, like Skelton, are growing up without much.

Later in life, Skelton was called "the man who made the entire world laugh." He claimed laughter was part of his religion.

"God's children and their happiness are my reasons for being," he used to say.

So he evolved into characters that made people laugh.

Just like he promised Wynn, there on the corner outside the Pantheon Theater, a lifetime ago. ■

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Laura Lane is a reporter for the Bloomington (Ind.) Herald-Times. She lives in Bloomington with her two children, Lilly Grace and Thomas.

## RESOURCES

### Online:

<http://redskelton.viuu.edu>

[www.redskeltonmuseum.com](http://www.redskeltonmuseum.com)

<http://www.imdb.com/name/nm0804026>

<http://profile.myspace.com/index.cfm?fuseaction=user.viewprofile&friendID=219148059>

<http://video.yahoo.com/watch/142856/1202344>