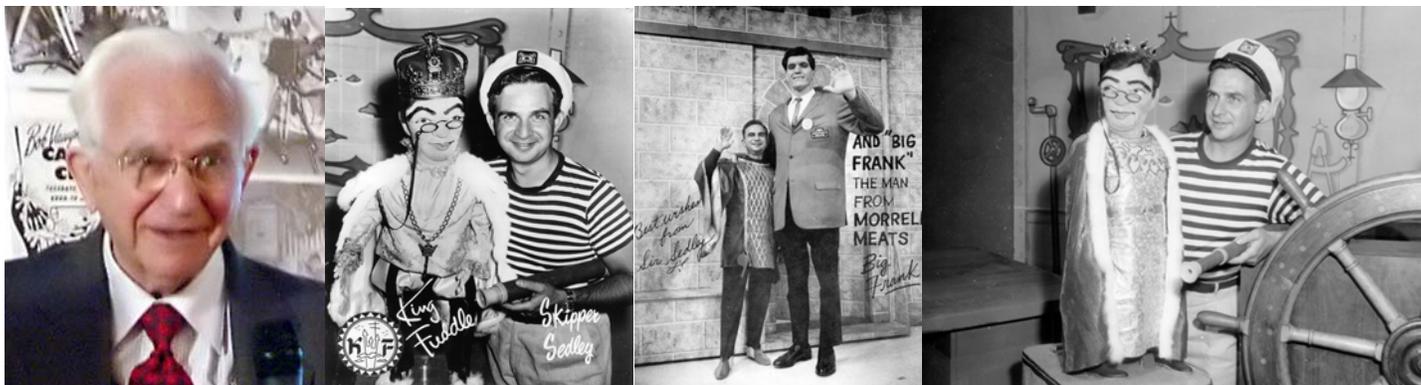


# In Memoriam: Bruce “Skipper” Sedley



By Kevin Wing

In the 1950s and 60s, during the early years of Bay Area television, **Bruce Sedley** was widely known to children as “Skipper Sedley” and “Sir Sedley,” a celebrated icon of children’s television in northern California. It was, of course, a much simpler time then, when kids would return home from a day at school to have an afternoon snack and sit down in front of the television set before dinnertime.

There were no video games or PlayStations in those days. Schoolchildren simply came home from school. And when they watched afternoon TV, they got to know Sedley, who eventually became a household name in the area.

And still, thousands and thousands of those same Bay Area kids likely lured their Moms and Dads to one of the Bay Area’s first amusement parks – Oakland’s beloved Children’s Fairyland. Back in the 50s, and still to this day, the little park next to the city’s Lake Merritt boasts the “Talking Storybooks,” the end result of the park’s newfangled way of entertaining visiting children. The device, which was erected at each themed fairy tale venue in the park, was a “message repeater” audio unit, which was a device with endless-loop audio. A plastic key inserted into the unit would turn on the message repeater, and the audio would play and the kids would hear fairy tale stories.

Sedley – the man who was a children’s favorite on Bay Area television during that era who also made a name for himself by inventing “the magic keys” and the “Talking Storybooks” at Fairyland, died Saturday, Jan. 21, at his home in Hong Kong.

He was 86.

Sedley is survived by his second wife, who resides in Hong Kong, and his two daughters, **Lin Sedley** of Kauai and **Lauren Ellis** of Nashville.

I met Sedley in the summer of 2009, when I interviewed him to be the subject of a *Silver Circle* profile for this newsletter (*Off Camera*, September 2009). I wasn’t born yet when Sedley was on Bay Area television, but I do remember those “Magic Keys” and the “Talking Storybooks” at Fairyland during my years growing up in the East Bay.

Sedley was inducted into the *Silver Circle* of the National Academy of Television Arts and Sciences’ San Francisco/Northern California Chapter, in 1997.

For my interview with Sedley, I met him for dinner at a restaurant in Burlingame, not far from San Francisco International Airport. It was called Gulliver’s. For the next four hours, we talked over dinner, as I took in every word to learn everything I could about this man, with the help of my reporter’s notebook and a mini tape recorder.

I recall thinking that Sedley, who was 84 at the time, had the mental and physical energy of someone 25 years younger. I was duly impressed. And, as the night wore on and I listened to him tell his story, I realized that I hadn’t met anyone quite like him.

From that interview spawned a friendship that I cherished. Over the next two years, Sedley asked me to assist him with two or three projects that he was working on, and I was happy to help. Yes, I don’t think he had the word “retirement” in his vocabulary. First of all, he was a globetrotter. He had moved to Hong Kong from the Bay Area in the 1980s, but had maintained an office in Burlingame. His company, Cor-Key Control Systems, was based, until last year, in a tiny 1960s-style office along one of the main drags to the airport. He eventually moved to Hong Kong to be closer to his company’s manufacturing unit, where it was more cost-effective to run his business. At the tiny office in Burlingame, little did any passerby realize that the owner of this venerable company invented the first concept for “card keys.” Today, when you use a card key to enter your workplace, gain access to a security gate or open a door to a hotel room, you have Sedley to thank. He invented the concept.

Sedley would return to the Bay Area about twice a year, and when he did, he’d always let me know in advance so we could meet up and have dinner at Gulliver’s, which became a favorite hangout. We’d talk business; he’d tell me about his next great idea. After all, Sedley was not just a Bay Area television pioneer, he was a pioneering modern-day inventor of sorts.

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Sedley was born in Oakland in 1925 and raised in Berkeley. His curiosity about the world around him led him to an interest in radio broadcasting at an early age. Before a stint in the service during World War II – to which he eventually did radio news broadcasts for troops overseas – he launched a career in Bay Area radio.

In 1944, he joined KJBS in San Francisco. After his discharge following the war, he returned to the Bay Area and joined KTIM in San Rafael, where he was an announcer.

Sedley then joined KROW in Oakland, where he remained for four years. Then, he opened up his own recording studio in his mother's San Francisco apartment building.

He eventually met a man named **Al Dinsdale**, who got Sedley interested in ventriloquism.

With his experience as a voice talent and his newfound love for ventriloquism and puppetry, Sedley went into animation work in the mid-1950s. Eventually, he would pop up on KGO-TV, doing live commercials for Laura Scudder's Potato Chips.

In 1957, KRON hired Sedley to be the host of children's programming that would surround the airing of the old *Popeye* cartoons.

During his years at KRON, Sedley became associated with the Oakland Parks Department, where he developed the "message repeater" audio units and the "magic keys" for Fairyland, which was integral to the success of the "Talking Storybooks" scattered throughout the park.

His contract with Fairyland also allowed him to make personal appearances at Fairyland, with his puppet, "**King Fuddle**" – much like what he was doing on KRON.

Sedley left KRON in 1960, but returned to TV in 1962 when he was hired by KTVU to host a kids' show that showcased the airing of old *Three Stooges* comedy shorts. Sedley also brought along "King Fuddle," and his place as a popular children's show host was solidified.

He stayed until 1964, and by then, doors were opening up for him everywhere, namely through his association with manufacturing keys. As one of the original developers of the card-key system, securing more than 240 U.S. and foreign patents along the way.

Sedley eventually associated himself with a company in Burbank that manufactured identification cards for defense plants and commercial facilities. The company liked Sedley's idea for card-key systems.

**Forrest Patton**, a longtime Sedley friend, said recently that Sedley recognized how to interact with children when he was on TV, and that was reason for much of his television success.

"He really wanted to get the audience involved," Patton said, who is the "custodian" of Sedley's extensive puppet collection.

"Bruce made countless personal appearances, and kids back then, like me, got the chance to get to know him. It was wonderful. You couldn't do that back then with **Howdy Doody**."

In 2009, Sedley expressed his thoughts about his TV career: "It was just a very enjoyable time for me then. I was always interested in theatrics and puppetry, and I enjoyed entertaining the kids. I've been lucky and fortunate to lead a very rewarding life."

He did just that, without a doubt. I will miss our friendly chats over dinner at Gulliver's. Rest in peace, Bruce, and thank you.

## **In Memoriam: Claudia Malis**



**Claudia Malis**, a Peabody

Award winning TV producer and independent filmmaker, died January 4 in Stamford, CT. She was 58, and died of cancer. She began her career as a news writer at KGO TV, after earning a BA from Harvard. As an African American female producer in TV newsrooms in the mid-1970s,

she was a pioneer in an industry that struggled to incorporate diverse voices behind the camera. Her work for ABC News, NBC News and PBS during a 30-year career was recognized with the George Foster Peabody Award, the Alfred I. DuPont Gold Baton and 11 Emmy® nominations. Her last film, *Why Us? Left Behind and Dying*, is screened by high school students across the country as part of their HIV/AIDS education curriculum.