

BY PEGGY ADLER

ALL ABOUT CARMICHAEL, AKA MISCHKA, JACK BENNY'S POLAR BEAR

The character Carmichael, a polar bear, was first written into Jack Benny's radio show in February 1939 and became one of his program's most beloved running gags. Given to the entertainer as a birthday gift, as the storyline went, Carmichael lived in the basement of Benny's Beverly Hills home and was in more than 20 episodes. In 1940, fans finally saw a live Carmichael in the feature film *Buck Benny Rides Again*. There, he was portrayed by a female Russian brown bear named Mischka, who was powdered for the part to make her look like a polar bear.

The district passenger representative for the Baltimore and Ohio Railroad at Los Angeles graphically described how the head of the property department at Paramount Pictures had him arrange to transport Mischka from her home in Clinton, Conn., to Los Angeles "right side up": "Jack Benny's polar bear, 'Carmichael,' with attendants, started from Clinton on the New Haven Road and was delivered to our road at New York. We carried it to St. Louis on the National Limited, and Rock Island-Southern Pacific handled to California."

After completing her scenes in the movie, Mischka returned to her Connecticut home. Shortly thereafter, Paramount discovered she would be needed back in Los Angeles for retakes. Her owner and trainer, Emil Pallenberg, objected, saying that she was hibernating. Studio executives, after checking with their research department, told Pallenberg, "Polar bears do not hibernate" and wired him to that effect — to which Pallenberg promptly replied, "Maybe your research department knows more than Carmichael — but I'll give odds they can't wake him [sic] up long enough to convince him [sic]."

Born in 1888, Pallenberg began training bears with his younger brother, Christian, in their hometown of Cologne, Germany, in 1906. By the time of his death in 1963, Emil was considered to have been the greatest bear trainer of his time, having originated most of the acrobatic tricks performed by bears to this day. He was the first person to teach a bear to ride a bicycle. He also taught his bears to rollerskate, dance, walk on stilts, play musical instruments, and walk the tightrope. At no time did The Pallenberg Wonder Bears, as they came to be known, perform in a cage. They performed on a platform or in a ring with a leash attached to a muzzle. Pallenberg bears



appeared in three major motion pictures, including *Buck Benny Rides Again*, and one was on Broadway for more than a year in the 1932 Jerome Kern/Oscar Hammerstein musical *Music in the Air*.

Pallenberg and his companion (and later, wife), Catharina Wouts Suvrein (aka Cato), came to the United States through Ellis Island in 1914 with three trained acrobatic bears to perform in vaudeville shows for six months — and became headliners in Ringling Bros.-owned circuses for more than two decades. Emil met Catharina in 1913 while performing with his bears in Holland, and she ran away with him and his

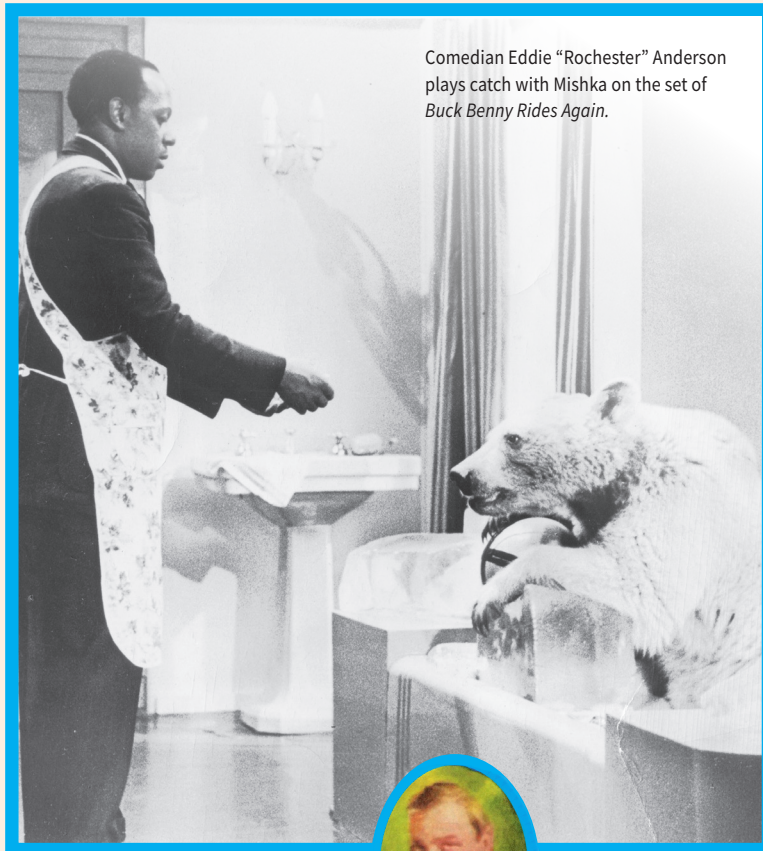
PEGGY ADLER, author of *Pallenberg Wonder Bears — From the Beginning*, has been in publishing since 1958, when at 16 she began illustrating books for a New York City publisher. Three years later, she began to write for them as well.

bruins to perform in Russia, leaving behind her innkeeper husband and 2-year-old son.

Emil Pallenberg and his Wonder Bears were with Ringling circuses from 1915 to at least 1939, and when they were not performing, lived in the small, shoreline town of Clinton, Conn., where I have lived since 1994. Their story is told in the biography *Pallenberg Wonder Bears — From the Beginning*, which I wrote and was published in October by BearManor Media. (No pun intended. BearManor's normal genre is Old Time Radio, movies, and TV.)

My indispensable collaborator is my friend, neighbor, and Emil Pallenberg's granddaughter, Dibirma Jean Burnham. While I did the investigative research, found all the legal documentation, and wrote the text, she supplied the family's archival photos; vaudeville, circus, stage, and motion picture contracts; and her grandfather's 11-page handwritten memoir, which he wrote in retirement.

Although the book publishing world has singularly categorized this 206-page book as "Circus Performing Arts," it is even more so a history book that follows members of the Pallenberg family from the mid-1800s to the present, profiling those who immigrated from



Comedian Eddie "Rochester" Anderson plays catch with Mishka on the set of *Buck Benny Rides Again*.



MISCHKA'S OWNER AND TRAINER, EMIL PALLEMBERG, IS CONSIDERED TO HAVE BEEN THE GREATEST BEAR TRAINER OF HIS TIME AND ORIGINATED MOST OF THE ACROBATIC TRICKS PERFORMED BY BEARS TO THIS DAY.

Germany to the U.S. and those who did not. Emil's older brother, Josef, was an animal anatomist and a renowned sculptor. Christian was an engineer who patented his inventions and eventually worked in the Detroit auto industry. And, of course, the aforementioned Emil famously trained acrobatic bears that headlined circuses. One of the most expansive parts of the book is a 60-page, detailed timeline that starts in 1854 and ends in 2018. There is also a 20-page, alphabetically arranged glossary, which from A to Z begins and ends with the U.S. government's Alien Enemy Registration Act, in force during World War I. It's followed by an 86-page photo gallery.

The book is available online at BearManor Media, Amazon, Barnes & Noble, and Books-a-Million as well as through any brick-and-mortar bookstore whose distributor is Ingram. 🐻

A version of this article was published in October on the Old Time Radio Catalog website.



Bear-training trailblazer Emil Pallenberg teaches a young cub to rollerskate.