



# CASEEN GAINES

Forewords by Wil Wheaton and Eugene B. Bergmann



Featuring illustrations by Ralphie's little brother, Ian Petrella!

# A CHRISTMAS STORY

*Behind the Scenes of a Holiday Classic*

*A*  
**CHRISTMAS**  
*Story*

**THE MAKING OF  
A HOLIDAY CLASSIC**

CASEEN GAINES

ECW PRESS



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*My guess is that either nobody will go to see it or  
millions of people will go to see it because it will catch on.  
It's the kind of movie that everyone can identify with.*

— **Roger Ebert** —  
1983



# CHAPTER ONE



# The Ten-year Itch

**S**omewhere in Coral Gables, Florida, a young Miami-based filmmaker named Bob Clark was doing his sixth lap around an unfamiliar neighborhood.

An hour earlier, he was getting into his car, on his way to pick up a date. He was dressed nicely, as a young gentleman should be, and made every effort to be punctual. However, on the way to his date, he became sidetracked.

Derailed.

Pre-occupied.

He fell in love.

As any young man will attest, it is easy to find oneself overcome with romantic feelings for a number of things. Send the sexiest woman in the world in to talk to a man during the Super Bowl and she may find herself waiting until the nearest commercial break to be noticed. Try to interfere with Mr. Fix-It's D.I.Y. project and you may be able to steal a few minutes of conversation, as long as you agree to hold the screws in the interim. If there's a *Star Wars* marathon on and you're not wearing a Princess Leia wig, you can forget about it, especially if you're dating a member of the ComicCon crowd. Young men are simpleminded creatures.

Clark's newfound infatuation was a man's voice on his car radio. That voice belonged to Jean Shepherd. And like your typical young man in love, Clark found it hard to end his first tryst. He prolonged the inevitable conclusion by taking the scenic route to his date's house, while Shep, as fans of his radio show affectionately called him, continued to tell his tale.

Jean Parker Shepherd was born on July 26, 1921, on Chicago's South Side. His family moved soon after to 2907 Cleveland Street in the Hessville section of Hammond, Indiana. Before graduating Hammond High School in 1939, Shepherd, like Bob Clark, also fell in love with radio. He received his Amateur Radio license at age sixteen — although some accounts state that he might have caught the radio bug even earlier than that — which ended up being the first step toward a long career as a great communicator.

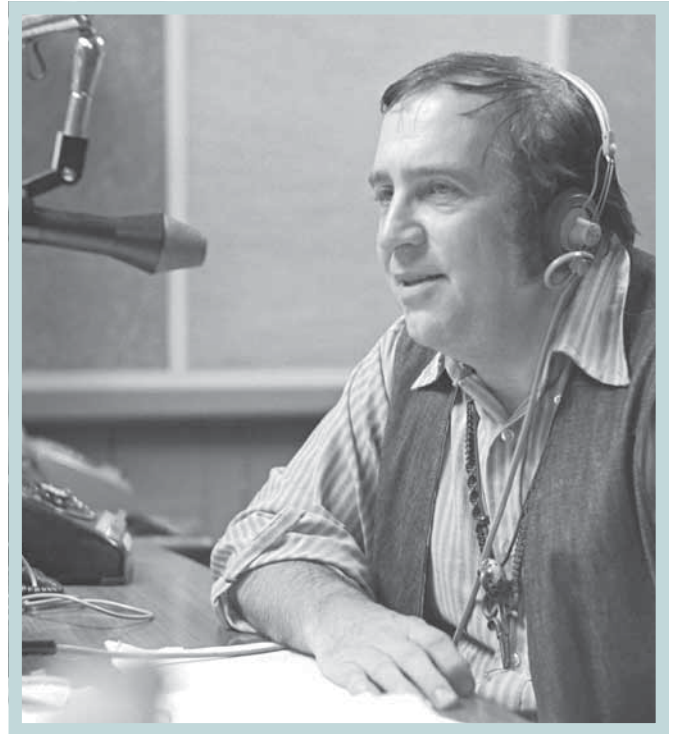
Jean Shepherd in 1961  
© Photofest



His radio skills were first put to use between 1942 and 1944 when, during WWII, Shepherd served as a part of the United States Army Signal Corps. Four years later, he landed his first job as a radio personality on WSAI out of Cincinnati. Between 1951 and 1953 he worked at radio station KYW in Philadelphia, but soon found himself back in Cincinnati at a different station, WLW.

It has been reported, largely by Shepherd himself, that he was offered the hosting job on NBC's *Tonight Show* by then host Steve Allen, who was preparing to relinquish his duties as master of ceremonies. While in Cincinnati, Shepherd hosted the late-night show, *Rear Bumper*.

The story goes that Allen saw Shepherd's show, was impressed, and wanted him to be his successor. The problem was, NBC executives were contractually bound to offer Jack Paar the gig first. If he declined, as the suits thought he would because they assumed he wanted a show during prime time and was uninterested in a late-night slot, Shepherd would be crowned the new heir to the *Tonight Show* throne. The execs were so certain, in fact, that they flew Shep out to New York to prepare for the job, only to find out soon after that Paar had accepted. The young radio guy's primary contribution to the *Tonight Show* from that point on would be as a member of the viewing audience.



Jean Shepherd in WOR studio in 1970 (Ofindsen)

According to those familiar with Shep's biography, there is little evidence to support that there's much truth to that story. Much like one of the tales told by Estelle Getty's Sophia Petrillo on *The Golden Girls*, Shepherd's story would have placed him just a half-step away from achieving a level of fame in his early thirties that most people can only dream about. However, even if the story is false, *something* brought Shepherd out to New York City in 1955, and that something could be given credit for the next exciting chapter in his life at WOR.

When one searches the internet for information about Shepherd, what comes up most frequently is that he is "an American raconteur." This phrase wouldn't necessarily be unusual, except that the term "raconteur," which is hardly ever used, is almost uniformly regarded as the official term for his job description.

Dictionary.com defines a raconteur as "a person who is skilled in relating stories and anecdotes interestingly." What, then, made Jean Shepherd so recognized as such an *interesting* storyteller?

"What comedians like to do is take something they want to make fun of, that they want the audience to have fun with, and what they will do is talk about what's wrong with it and why it's stupid," comedian Jerry Seinfeld



Bob Clark © Ian Petrella

said in a 2012 appearance honoring Shepherd's career. "[Shepherd] did the exact opposite in so many cases. It's a very difficult trajectory in comedy to say, 'Isn't this wonderful?' . . . He saw this exciting, cataclysmic drama in the ordinary."

In fact, Shepherd saw his popularity surge while at WOR largely because of his "ordinary" sensibilities. His radio show broadcasted regularly on weeknights between 1 a.m. and 5:30 a.m., and he didn't use a script or notes. He spoke on the radio like an elder around a campfire telling

stories to his kin. His stories explored the simple aspects of life, often with many diversions, extraneous adjectives and adverbs, and convoluted plot twists that added more flair to the story.

Shepherd occasionally told semi-autobiographical stories about his "Old Man," Jean Parker Shepherd Sr., his mother, Ann, and Randy, his kid brother. He often assumed the role of a character named Ralphie, whose life experiences closely mirrored his own. Stories about his childhood were communicated through the fictional Parker family, also of Hammond. In 1964, his stories started to appear in *Playboy* (for those who read the magazine for the articles). In 1966, Shep released an anthology of Ralphie's stories, *In God We Trust, All Others Pay Cash*, which became a runaway hit and, to this day, has never been out of print.

As Bob Clark listened to the radio broadcast that day, he couldn't help but be reminded of his own upbringing. He was born on August 3, 1939, in New Orleans, but his family moved to Birmingham, Alabama, soon after. Shep's stories reflected Midwestern values and a certain simple charm that had long since been lost by the 1960s, but as Clark realized while he was listening, and as thousands of other listeners nationwide already had discovered, the values typically described as "Midwestern" are hardly specific to that region of the United States. Sure, Clark had probably never experienced a snow storm in Alabama, and certainly not at the University of Miami, where he attended school for Creative Dramatic Writing after reneging on his acceptance of a football scholarship at Hillsdale College in Michigan, but there isn't a child in the country who didn't wish against the odds for

something they wanted for Christmas, even though their parents told them it was not likely to materialize under the tree on December 25.

Clark's career had yet to take off. He was a student working on making a name for himself directing regional theater in the Miami area. A local film producer suggested to him that he might want to take a crack at directing for the screen. He accepted, and in 1966, *The Emperor's New Clothes*, a short film starring none other than Hollywood icon John Carradine, became Clark's directorial debut.

A year later, Clark spearheaded a project called *She-Man*, a short film about a soldier who is blackmailed to take estrogen pills and wear lingerie by a sadistic transvestite. Listening to the radio the evening he was to pick up his date, the young director decided what his first feature film project would be. He stopped taxiing around the neighborhood and arrived at his destination, just short of an hour late.

"I picked up my very irate date," Clark recalled. "And I decided at that moment that I was going to make a movie of Jean's work."

What was it about Shep's storytelling that had made such an impression on Clark?

"I was so enamored with his offhand, flippant kind of deceptively wry and witty comments," Clark said.

However, the road to the Cineplex was harder than the young director had anticipated. He had hoped *A Christmas Story* would be his first feature film, and strongly believing it would be a success, he even began work on a script before gaining Shep's participation and approval.

But *A Christmas Story* wasn't Clark's first feature. Instead, he directed a series of horror films throughout the 1970s, including *Children Shouldn't Play with Dead Things*, *Dead of Night*, and his first seasonal flick, *Black Christmas*. During this time, Clark reached out to Jean with the offer to help bring his stories to film. The storyteller, who was now also appearing weekly on television in a PBS series entitled *Jean Shepherd's America*, was ecstatic.

Fred Barzyk, *America's* producer, remembers Shep's initial excitement. "[Bob Clark] was another of these kinds of people who were drawn deeply to Shepherd," he says. "And he came to Shepherd and said, 'I want to do *A Christmas Story*,' and for Shepherd this was big because it was going to be a movie. Maybe at long last people would recognize Shepherd as an important

American icon. So he cut off all things with television. Didn't invite me to the set, he didn't do anything. He had moved on."

But the move wouldn't be immediate. Before the movie could be shopped around to studio executives, it had to be written. It was agreed that Shepherd would write the script, which would be a composite of his published short stories, most of which appeared in his 1966 anthology *In God We Trust, All Others Pay Cash*, and unpublished tales from his appearances at colleges throughout the 1970s. Leigh Brown, Shep's wife and longtime producer, would cowrite, along with Bob Clark himself.

"It substantially comes from Shepherd's work except, oddly enough, the narration," the director said in 2003 about the screenplay. "We probably worked the narration more because we had to fit various pieces."

One of the aspects of the film that sets it apart from others of the time is Shep's narration, which is both intellectual and simplistic. At times, the voice-over, which Shepherd himself provided in the voice of Ralphie as an adult, serves to comment on what the young protagonist was thinking at the time of the film's events. In other cases, adult Ralphie uses the narration as an opportunity to comment on what occurred in his family after the film's events, as a way of showing the importance of this time period in the Parkers' lives.

Whether the filmmakers knew this at the time is uncertain, but the narration ended up being an essential component of the movie, as it serves as a bridge between the adult world and the kid world. The young, and young at heart, can appreciate the insight into little Ralphie's thoughts, which often cause the audience to recall their own childhood antics. Additionally, grown-ups watching the movie see the narration as a vehicle by which to appreciate the nostalgia in the film. *A Christmas Story* is as much about being a child in the 1940s as it is about how times have changed since then. Jean Shepherd, with his familiarly sardonic voice and his uniquely witty critique on situations, takes us through that journey with his disembodied performance in the film.

Of course, the movie isn't simply about how things have changed since the post-Depression era. As the French novelist Jean-Baptiste Alphonse Karr wrote in 1849, "The more things change, the more they stay the same." This is certainly one of the themes present in *A Christmas Story*. While kids in the 1980s weren't racing home to listen to *Little Orphan Annie* on the radio, they were bolting from school to catch episodes of their favorite shows on

television. Little brothers were still annoying; parents still argued and didn't understand their kids. The timelessness of the film is more important than the fact that it is set in a particular era in American history.

This agelessness is one of the true accomplishments of Shepherd's work, in spite of its contemporary references. For example, Ralphie doesn't long for any old toy weapon but instead a Red Ryder BB gun "with a compass in the stock and this thing that tells time." One needs only to have seen the film or an advertisement for a Red Ryder BB gun once to see this specific model in their imagination, which is astonishing, especially since this toy never actually existed. It was merely a creation of Shepherd's fantastic mind. In recent years the gun has been available for sale as a result of the film's enduring popularity. Despite this truth, the reference to that particular toy, as well as the evocation of *Little Orphan Annie* radio serials, *The Wizard of Oz*, and, in the original short story, *Snow White and the Seven Dwarfs*, still manages to induce a nostalgic feeling and yearning for "the good old days," even for those who weren't around during that period. Shep's work doesn't feel dated because of the references — it simultaneously feels classic and timeless.

As a testament to just how timeless Shep's stories are, exactly when *A Christmas Story* is set remains ambiguous. In 2003, Bob Clark stated that the film wasn't set in a specific year. Instead, it takes place sometime between



Melinda Dillon and Ian Petrella © Ian Petrella

the late 1930s and early 1940s. Props in the film corroborate this. The *Look Magazine* with Shirley Temple on the cover, where Ralphie slips in an advertisement for his mother to see, is from 1937; however, the Speed-O-Matic style decoder he receives wasn't released until 1940.

In the end, the inconsistencies as to which Christmas season the film chronicles almost make the movie more realistic. After all, the film is a flashback, and as every adult knows, childhood memories can sometimes become distorted. The adult Ralphie narrator in the movie may be unreliable regarding the specific details, but what's important is his overall impression of his quest to obtain what he describes as "the greatest Christmas gift I had ever received, or would ever receive."

For the main framework of the film, it was decided to use "Duel in the Snow, or, Red Ryder Nails the Cleveland Street Kid," which first appeared in *Playboy* in 1964. The story was part of *In God We Trust* two years later. The central plot is all-too familiar for any fan of the film: Ralphie Parker wants nothing more than to find an Official Red Ryder Carbine Action Two-Hundred-Shot Range Model Air Rifle under his Christmas tree.

A great deal of "Duel in the Snow" materializes in the finished film. Besides the primary story arc, there are minor details that found their way into the script. Ralphie's teacher makes an appearance, even though her name, Miss Bodkin, was changed to Miss Shields. Our hero receives pink bunny slippers from Aunt Clara, but with the goal of going for the deeper belly laugh, the screenwriting trio changed the footwear into a full-fledged outfit that made Ralphie look like "a deranged Easter bunny." In a self-deprecating touch, Jean Shepherd had written the pajama joke in homage to his real-life frustrations with being given a girl's name. He would often tell of how he had to beat kids up who teased him about his name — Jean with a "J" — when he was a youngster. When Ralphie says in the film that he's convinced his aunt thought he was a girl all his life, it's a more autobiographical moment of Shepherd than some might realize.

Die-hard fans will notice other consistencies between the story and the film. In the short story, Ralphie describes the process of getting ready for school as being "like getting ready for extended Deep-Sea Diving," a line echoed in the film. The boys attend Warren G. Harding School, the real location of Shepherd's elementary education, in both the story and the film. The enterprising Ralphie also sneaks advertisements for the gun between

the pages of his mother's magazines, in an attempt to remind her about his Christmas wish, and the Old Man has tantrums filled with four-letter words directed at the cantankerous furnace in the basement.

In reading Shep's original short stories, what sticks out is how he celebrates aspects of life that most people would consider unworthy of celebrating. The casual dinnertime ritual between parents and children facilitates deep character studies, filled as it is with interpersonal drama and cerebral passages about such mundane concepts like the temperature of the cabbage on the plate or whether or not the oldest son said a bad word at school that day. This is, of course, to say that Jean Shepherd had a natural knack for writing about life as it was and, in many ways, as it used to be. For him, the past was not only a prologue but also the present.

"He talked about the traditional minor pleasures of growing up and he depicts typical family life and their relationships," says Eugene Bergmann, author of *Excelsior, You Fathead! The Art and Enigma of Jean Shepherd*. "The kind mother, the annoying kid brother, the father who's a bit distant and stern, but who comes through in the end with a present Ralphie wants so badly.

"He made a lot of comments about 'Gee, look, this is the way people actually act,'" Bergmann continues. "What he liked to say is that people are full of what he would describe as 'foibles,' and that doesn't mean horrible characteristics, just sort of a little bit of humor and caring and love for humanity in the imperfections that he found for people. He liked to describe those strange things people would sometimes do and he would like to suggest that they were both not quite the way an intelligent person should act, and yet they were amusing and loveable also. I found that rather touching and always funny."

Jean Shepherd's love for the ordinary was also apparent in the other stories that informed the film's script. "The Counterfeit Secret Circle Member Gets the Message, or, The Asp Strikes Again," a story that appeared for the first time in *In God We Trust*, was also influential. The short story finds Ralphie frenzied after his Little Orphan Annie secret decoder pin arrives in the mail and he sets out to decipher the encrypted message that was delivered in a series of letters and number combinations. The story ends with the message turning out to be nothing more than "a crummy commercial" for Ovaltine. In 1965's "Grover Dill and The Tasmanian Devil," which was originally published by *Playboy* and later turned up in *In God We Trust*, Shepherd

follows the neighborhood bully and one of his toadies as they target their next victim. This story also ended up being interwoven into the fabric of the film's script in a scene that taught the world that Lifebuoy soap tasted disgusting and could even lead to blindness as a result of "soap poisoning." The resolution to this story was incorporated into the sequence of the film; it occurs after Ralphie utters "the queen-mother of all dirty words," a significant change from the original short story it was lifted from.

Based on the success of *In God We Trust*, in 1971 Shepherd released a second short story anthology entitled *Wanda Hickey's Night of Golden Memories: And Other Disasters*. It is in that collection that "The Grandstand Passion Play of Delbert and the Bumpus Hounds" appears. There are noticeable influences from "Passion Play" on the final script, but fans of the film will notice some substantial differences. For example, in *A Christmas Story*, the meal that is taken from the Parker home isn't ham, but turkey. More importantly, the original short story isn't even set around Christmastime, but Easter. Very little of the story actually materializes in the film, except for the Old Man's adverse relationship with the redneck family which, in the movie, is only referenced.

It's safe to say that when the narratives were raided for stories that would be a perfect fit for the silver screen, even Jean Shepherd himself couldn't have anticipated the importance of including "My Old Man and the Lascivious Special Award That Heralded the Birth of Pop Art," which appeared for the first time in *In God We Trust*. The now all-too-familiar story is the tale of Ralphie's father, who wins a "major award" in the form of a distinctive lamp, ". . . a silk-stockinged lady's leg, realistically flesh-colored, wearing a black spike-heeled slipper," Shepherd wrote. "The knee was crooked slightly and the leg was shown to the middle of the thigh. That was all. No face; no torso; no dress — just a stark, disembodied, provocative leg."

It is here that Shep's unique storytelling ability is best displayed. After the mother breaks her husband's prized possession, the patriarch's response is not only completely in line with what we would expect from the character but also the kind of resolution longtime fans of the raconteur came to love from his undeniably humorous stories.

"My father always was a superb user of profanity," Shepherd wrote in the story. "But now he came out with just one word, a real Father word, bitter and hard."

“Dammit.”

Molded in the pre-television era of radio serials, Jean Shepherd was a walking, talking, and almost always monologuing relic. He had made a name for himself by speaking for hours on end into a radio microphone, virtually isolating himself. When callers were encouraged to call his radio broadcast, Shep would often refuse to pick up the phone. Instead, he would talk to himself, making up voices and pretending he was arguing with real callers. While touring the college circuit on speaking engagements, he would berate students who called out from the crowd and remind them that he was performing a solo act and shouldn't be disturbed. Those who interviewed him on television and radio found him to be an enigma. His stories contradicted anecdotes he had previously told and he would claim that he was telling the truth both times, while also laughing at the suggestion that anyone actually believed him.

Although Shepherd regularly used the phrase “I'll never forget the time” to begin a story, an obvious attempt to lend some truth to his wildly exaggerated, or downright fabricated, stories, he simultaneously maintained that his tales were simply a work of fiction and nothing more. That is, unless he was saying the opposite.

“I take people out of my past or I put them and use them as composite characters just as any good writer would,” Shep said at Fairleigh Dickinson University in 1967. “You don't write out of a vacuum. I used real names, but they're not exactly like they are in the stories.”

“None of these stories, by the way, are based on any of my own memories,” he stated in a 1975 interview with Barry Farber on WOR. “None of them are based on any — the families are all — I've created a mythical family, like Faulkner created a mythical country.”

So, which is true? Are Flick and Schwartz actual people, or merely creations of Jean Shepherd's imagination? The question seems to be one that Shep not only invited but relished.

“Although he told hundreds of stories about his kidhood, the extent to which the tales were true to the ‘real’ Jean Shepherd is difficult to discern,” author Eugene Bergmann writes in his biography of Shepherd. “His adolescence is almost a blank record.”

Despite his repeated declarations that his stories were all made up, there *was* a real Flick — Jack Flickinger — who lived just a few blocks away from

Melinda Dillon  
© Ian Petrella



the Shepherds. Miss Ruth Shields was really one of young Jean’s teachers, and there was even a family from Kentucky who lived next door.

At best, Shep’s claims to have fabricated all the stories about his friends and family seem to be a gross misremembering of the truth. Shep did have a younger brother named Randall. In his stories, Randy was a fairly boiler-plate younger brother: there were the occasional displays of sibling rivalry that would result in a play-fight, or the younger would be engaged in some display of immaturity, like refusing to eat his food at the dinner table, making a mess and refusing to clean it up, or hiding in kitchen cupboards. When Shep moved away from Hammond, the real Randy stayed behind, working for the Borden Milk Company until his adulthood.

There is no evidence to suggest that Randy was as annoying as Shepherd wrote, but in a way, this potential inconsistency hits at the heart of what made his writing such a success. Through his alter ego of Ralphie Parker, the adult Shepherd wrote about his kid brother in the way that he viewed Randy when he was younger. What pair of brothers, as youngsters, especially those as close in age as the Parker/Shepherd pair, would take the time to get to know the other as a person and not just “my older brother” or “my kid brother”? In Randy’s ambiguity there is a truth that resonates strongly

with Shep's audience, mostly because it allows for the nondescript younger brother to serve as a blank slate for the immature and annoying elementary-aged family member in each of our lives.

In his stories, the mother is always portrayed as a plain-looking and slightly pathetic character, certainly not quite ready for someone to drop by unexpectedly, for she was likely to be in her chenille bathrobe or have some stain on her clothes that she had chosen to ignore because she had no one to impress. The mother meant well, as most do, but wouldn't parent in the traditional sense. Shep would often tell a story of his mother sitting him on her knee, extolling about the virtues of money making as the key to success in life. Having an honest job that enables you to pay your way in life is a valuable thing to aspire to, but most mothers wouldn't consider that the best lesson to teach a child at an early age. In her eyes, money wasn't the root of all evil; it was the ticket to happiness. The child Shepherd knew his mother was espousing wisdom, but as an adult, he recognized that his mother's advice prematurely turned him into a hardened cynic who refused to believe in concepts of charity, selflessness, and generosity.

"Jean, you got to make dough," Shepherd claims his mother would tell him when he was five years old. "You got to make dough."

So, throughout his life, that's what he set out to do.

And what of his father, the one that audiences remember as the inaccessible, yet good-at-heart white knight that ultimately gets Ralphie the Red Ryder BB gun he so desired? How accurate is his portrayal in the film to Jean Shepherd's real Old Man?

While the script written by the trio of collaborators portrays the father, the Old Man, as a blue-collar family man with a hard exterior, it seems that this was a departure from not only the father Shep often wrote about in his stories but also the man he lived with until adulthood.

First off, the Shepherds weren't blue-collar. The real-life Old Man worked for a milk company as a cashier, the same company where the real-life Randy worked. While the film suggests that the Parkers are working class, a lot of the original stories that inspired the movie actually deal with the juxtaposition of being a family of modest means living in a steel mill city in industrial Indiana.

Additionally, the softer side of the father that appears at moments like when he buys Ralphie the Red Ryder BB gun may not have actually existed.

Darren McGavin,  
Melinda Dillon,  
and Ian Petrella  
© Ian Petrella



If it did, it certainly isn't how Shepherd actually remembers his father.

"He never offered much advice, my father," he recalled in April 1960. "He never really offered any advice that I can pull out of the great — I'm always amused — not only amused, I'm always a little bit — I feel a little inferior. These guys I read about all the time who write autobiographies and it seems that people were always saying great things to them that affected their lives."

In his biography of Jean Shepherd, Eugene Bergmann cites the source of what Shep himself described as hatred for his father. Shep had asked actor James Broderick, who played the Old Man in the 1976 television movie *The Phantom of the Open Hearth*, to predict what happened after the events of the film ended, and then let the actor in on the answer.

"Okay," Shep began. "One year to the day after Ralph's prom, in fact the week of Ralph's high school graduation, the Old Man comes home, announces he's leaving the family, and takes off for Palm Beach with a twenty-year-old stenographer with long blond hair and a Ford convertible. They never hear from him again."

This wasn't just Shepherd trying to convince the actor to delve deeper into the part; it was his art imitating life. "I think it was one of the major blows in Shepherd's life, why he had such a damaged ego in many ways," producer Fred Barzyk says. "Everybody reacts differently to different kinds of losses. When his father sat him down and said he's [sic] leaving his mother, it really — it was real pain for Shepherd."

Characteristic of Jean Shepherd's usual frankness but somewhat surprising for promotional materials in advance of a film's release, MGM's production notes for the film provided some insight into the raconteur's true feelings about not only his real parents but also the way Ralphie's parents appear in the film.

"I saw the Old Man in *A Christmas Story* as a guy who grew up hustling pool games at the age of twelve and was supporting himself by the age of fourteen," Shepherd was reported as saying in 1983. "And Darren McGavin's sardonic attitude was exactly the characterization I had in mind. Ralphie's mother is the kind of woman I figure grew up in a family of four or five sisters and married young. She digs the Old Man, but also knows he's as dangerous as a snake. In a way, the movie is really about these people, not Christmas or Santa Claus."

According to Scott Schwartz, the actor cast as Flick in the film, the screenwriting process consisted primarily of taking Shepherd's stories and making them more simplistic for a general audience. "Jean Shepherd had a vocabulary second to none," Schwartz says. "You could hand him a ballpoint pen and he could describe you for a half an hour. His vocabulary was out of this world. When they wrote *A Christmas Story*, they really had to tone down a lot of his vocabulary to more laymen's terms so that everybody could understand it."

The script was completed six months after they began working on it and, to the disappointment of all involved in the writing process, nothing else happened with it. Clark attempted to drum up some interest from movie studios to produce the film, but because he was a director with some modest B-movie hits underneath his belt, no executives were very warm to the idea of having him spearhead a quaint Christmas movie set in the Depression era. The idea, they were sure, wouldn't sell, and there was nothing in Clark's resumé that suggested to them that he could take a film that sounded like it had a snowball's chance in hell of being successful.

And then he directed a little film called *Porky's*. In 1982, you were hard pressed to find a film critic of significance saying anything kind about the raunchy teen comedy. Celebrated movie appraiser Roger Ebert of the *Chicago Sun-Times* gave the film one-and-a-half stars, easily one of the more positive reviews, and stated that Bob Clark “blew it” when it came to making a good film. He concluded his review with one final dig: “I see that I have neglected to summarize the plot of *Porky's*. And I don’t think I will,” he wrote. “I don’t feel like writing one more sentence (which is, to be sure, all it would take).”

As Ebert’s review, which uses three sentences to state that it won’t waste one more on providing context to his opinion piece, demonstrated, Bob Clark’s film was one that critics loved to hate. However, despite the vitriol from the chattering class, or perhaps because of it, teenagers lined up around the block to see it. The movie, which was produced for \$5 million, made over \$105 million in its initial theatrical run and was the fifth highest grossing film



Bob Clark on the set of *Porky's* © Twentieth Century Fox Film Corporation / Photofest



Director Bob Clark with Peter Billingsley, Melinda Dillon, Ian Petrella, and Darren McGavin © Ian Petrella

of the year in the United States, behind *E.T.: The Extra-Terrestrial*, *Tootsie*, *An Officer and a Gentleman*, and *Rocky III*. In short, it was a mammoth success, and as mammoth successes often do in the film industry, it gave Clark some capital to spend — and he knew just the project to spend it on.

“*Porky’s* has allowed me to make studio films without having to sacrifice any of the freedom or control I had as an independent,” he said in 1983. “At an earlier stage, I would have been forced to make unacceptable creative compromises — but not now.”

*A Christmas Story*, which at the time was still being referred to under the working title *In God We Trust* as a nod to Shepherd’s original collection of short stories, was re-pitched to the major motion pictures studios. After much persuasion, MGM agreed to give Clark \$4.4 million to produce the film. To save money, Clark agreed to work on the film without a fee, and even contributed \$150,000 of his own money to the production. It was later reported that as a result, the director was made a forty percent stakeholder in the film. Those familiar with Jean Shepherd’s business dealings claim that he also contributed financially to the film and was part owner, but the details are less clear.

As happy as the director was to finally be making *A Christmas Story*, the experience was often bittersweet for him. Although a major studio agreed to release the film, they had no expectations that it would be successful and

little faith that it would even be worth watching. They provided such a small budget and so little support that what should have been Clark's blessing was, at times, perceived to be a bit of a curse.

"I've paid a terrible price to do this picture," he said in March of 1983, as filming was wrapping in Toronto. "I have to do three films back-to-back this year. I'm a bonded slave right now. I like the material in each one of them. But they [Hollywood studios] play very hard ball. But I will never have to do that again. However, I'm sure whatever I want to do the next time, they'll extract a very high price from me. "I said I wouldn't work [on another film] until I do [*A Christmas Story*]," he continued. "So I'm doing *A Christmas Story* as part of a package for MGM. And I have a two-picture deal with Fox, although they let me off to do this one."

A production company, Christmas Tree Films, was established through the collaboration of Clark and Shepherd, and while post-production was being completed on the inevitable *Porky's* sequel, they began to move full steam ahead on making the film that Clark had paid his high price for. If MGM had known the film was going to be a success, perhaps they would have thrown more money at the picture. For Clark's crew and the cast, the process of moviemaking might have been a little bit easier, but then, without the need for some creative cost-cutting throughout shooting, the whole thing might have been a lot less fun and the final film a lot less charming.

Filling the role of Ralphie, the film's pint-sized protagonist, was relatively easy. By the time he auditioned for *A Christmas Story*, Peter Billingsley was already a recognizable face to the public. He had scored his first television commercial gig at the age of two and appeared in over a hundred commercials before he was a teenager. Messy Marvin, a pseudo-spokesman for Hershey's chocolate syrup, was one of his most memorable characters.

Billingsley's work wasn't limited to commercials. In 1981, he starred alongside Burt Reynolds in the film *Paternity*, which earned him a nomination in the "Best Young Comedian — Motion Picture or Television" category at the Young Artist Awards. The following year he was nominated in the same category for his stint co-hosting the NBC series *Real People*.

So it was a mild surprise to him that after he auditioned for *A Christmas Story*, he went weeks without hearing back from his agent as to whether or not he had gotten the role. Billingsley was the first actor who was seriously

considered for the part, but director Bob Clark passed him over because he thought the choice was too obvious. A nationwide search ensued, which resulted in over 8,000 kids auditioning for the lead role. Ultimately, Clark came to his senses. He watched Billingsley's audition tape again and made his decision that instant. "I must be crazy," the director said out loud to himself. "Peter *is* Ralphie."

The decision to cast Billingsley was a smart one. Not only was the actor perfect on-screen, but he also was the consummate professional on the set. By the time the film was released, the promotional team at MGM was so impressed with his poise and intelligence that they boasted his 150 IQ score in press materials for the film. Other *Christmas Story* alum who shared the screen with him sing his praises to this day.

"Peter Billingsley was gifted like Jackie Cooper, Shirley Temple, and some of the great kid actors from the past," says Tedde Moore, who played his schoolteacher, Miss Shields. "He was the most terrific boy. He worked very hard and understood what he was doing and loved it. It was like he wasn't a child."

"I was excited to work with Peter Billingsley because I was a big fan of *Real People* and his Hershey commercials," says Zack Ward, who played Ralphie's main tormentor, the yellow-eyed Scut Farkus. "I was a little star-struck by him."

"I knew exactly who he was, so it was kind of exciting working with him," says Ian Petrella, who was cast as the kid brother Randy. "We developed a friendship, but it was obvious we kind of had this older brother-little brother thing going on where we got along, but then there'd be times where we didn't get along. That's just how kids are. We got along really well, though. It was a great experience working with him."

Melinda Dillon was cast as the matriarch to the Parker family, primarily based on her appearance in *Close Encounters of the Third Kind*. According to Bob Clark, she was the only person seriously considered for the role. "*Close*



© Ian Petrella



Melinda Dillon with  
Ian Petrella and  
Peter Billingsley  
© Ian Petrella

*Encounters* was all I needed to see,” he said. “I talked to her and she wanted to do it, so we did it.”

On the set, Dillon was the big superstar as far as the kids were concerned. Her young co-stars, especially Ian Petrella, idolized her. “Melinda was an absolute sweetheart,” he explains. “At the same time, she marked my first time working with a celebrity. She was the mother in *Close Encounters of the Third Kind*, and that was one of my favorite films growing up. I got to work with someone who worked with aliens, so that was pretty awesome. I had a lot of questions for her about it — ‘How did they make the aliens? How did they get them to move?’ She was just very kind and very sweet about all of that. We got along great. She was wonderful to everybody. She was wonderful to my mom and wonderful to all the kids.”

Veteran character actor Darren McGavin was cast as Frank Parker, although in the film he is simply referred to as “the Old Man.” The actor played the title role in the television series *Kolchak: The Night Stalker*, and alongside Burt Reynolds in the NBC western series *Riverboat*. By the time he appeared on screen as the grumpy head of the Parker clan, he was a recognizable face to many in the viewing audience.

While it seems as though the actor was born to play the Old Man, the part nearly went to an even more famous Hollywood hotshot. Jack Nicholson, who had already won an Academy Award for *One Flew Over the Cuckoo’s Nest*, initially expressed interest in being a part of the film.

“I had gone to meet with Jack,” director Bob Clark said in 2003. “They wanted me to do a film with Jack called *Turn Left or Die* at MGM, but they also gave Jack the script to *A Christmas Story*. They didn’t tell me until later that Jack really liked *A Christmas Story* and might very well have done it, but they didn’t want to pay Jack Nicholson money to do *A Christmas Story*.”

According to Clark, McGavin was aware that he wasn’t the first choice for the role, and made it a priority to show that he was deserving and appreciative of it. “He knew full well there had been at least four other actors

projected [for this part],” Clark says. “When I met him off the plane, he said, ‘Who’s the person who had sense enough to put me in this part?’ and I was able to say, ‘Me,’ because I was asking for him from the first over some of the bigger name actors.”

In the end, everything worked out the way it should have. Nicholson went on to film *Terms of Endearment*, which earned him his second Academy Award, and McGavin went on to star in what would become the most recognizable role of his career.

“Jack is fabulous,” Clark said. “I love him, but thank God he didn’t [end up with the part] because Darren *is* the Old Man.”

The other actors in the film concur. Not only is McGavin impressive on-screen, but he also left a lasting impression on the other performers he worked with on the film. “Darren was professional,” Petrella says. “He was definitely a nice guy, but I didn’t know that before starting the film. I didn’t know much about Darren and who he was, but my mom did. One of the things she told me was that a lot of times, older actors don’t necessarily like to work with younger actors, ‘so let’s not find out the hard way and let’s just be on our best behavior around Mr. McGavin.’ And that’s what I was. I was on my best behavior around him. And I think because of that, there are no bad stories to tell.”

Despite his early trepidations and his mother’s warning, Ian found the actor great to work with. McGavin’s level of professionalism extended beyond his performance, as the actor also showed a concern for the production aspects of the film. “He had a lot of vested interest in this film, so it was just as important to him to make sure this was a good movie as it was for Bob and it was for Jean,” Petrella continues. “When Darren was on the set, he was ready to go and do his part. He probably wasn’t going to put up with the antics of an eight-year-old, so I made sure that he didn’t have to.”

“Darren was great,” Peter Billingsley said in 2003. “I had never worked with someone who knew so much about everything. Any question



Darren McGavin in *Kolchak: The Night Stalker*  
© Universal TV / Photofest



Ian Petrella  
© Ian Petrella

on the set, Darren had faced it. He had been through it. He was such a pro and didn't have to tell you that he was. He was just so confident and knew absolutely everything." Tedde Moore agrees: "He was a really beautifully trained actor, a really serious actor."

Ian Petrella was the last child to be hired for *A Christmas Story*. Prior to shooting, the cast members rehearsed for the film at director Bob Clark's house in Canada, but without the character of kid brother Randy. While McGavin, Dillon, and Billingsley prepared, and with just a few days left before shooting was to begin, an aggressive search was going on behind the scenes to find the last piece of the Parker family puzzle.

"I was a child actor and it was just another random audition that you go out for," Ian explains. "My agent called me up and said I was needed to fill the role of the younger brother in a holiday film and that was pretty much it."

With Clark and his crew relieved that they would start shooting on schedule, Ian was also excited to be cast in his first feature film. "I was a big fan of films at a young age," he says. "So, not only did I value that I was going to be in a movie, but I also was going to get to see how movies were made." *A Christmas Story* was an excellent film for him to cut his teeth on. Bob Clark was supportive and, for the young actor, it was generally fun to have the freedom to be a kid.

"Bob Clark allowed you as a child to bring in certain moments of your life to your performance," he says. "Randy wasn't a specific character. For God's sake, he had all of three lines in the film. He's basically the R2-D2 of *A Christmas Story*. He makes funny noises, whines and cries, and laughs and falls in the snow so there wasn't a whole lot to him. Everything was physicality with Randy, and as far as Bob was concerned, there wasn't this whole backstory on who Randy was. We didn't have conversations like what were his dreams, what were his visions . . . he's a frickin' kid! He doesn't want to eat his food and that's it."

With the principal cast in place, production moved forward. While the film was set in Hohman, a fictitious city based on Hammond, Indiana, where Jean Shepherd grew up, Cleveland was decided as the first shooting location.



This was mostly due to a little department store named Higbee's, and the owners' unprecedented desire to transform their store into the North Pole.



# CHAPTER FOUR



# *Indiana,* Canada

**E**ight-year-old **Ian Petrella** sat at the dinner table across from Darren McGavin, who was reading his newspaper. To his left sat Melinda Dillon, with large blond hair that made her look a little bit like a sparkler on the fourth of July. Peter Billingsley sat across from her, buttering a thick slice of bread. Ian, who was wearing a pink bib and a maroon sweater, lifted his dinner plate and planted his face in his food. The youngster put the plate back down, laughing like a demented clown, as meatloaf and mashed potatoes stuck to his nose and chin.

Ian Petrella getting ready for his snowsuit scene  
© Ian Petrella



Peter Billingsley and Ian Petrella © Ian Petrella

It was one of the many shooting days spent at Madger Studios in Toronto. On this day, the “Mommy’s Little Piggy” sequence, as fans of the film have come to call it, was being shot. For the young Ian, filming the scene was a real test of endurance. “It was something you had to do over and over because this was the time when you only had one 35mm camera to shoot a movie with,” Petrella says. “If you needed different angles, you’d have to break that camera down. It was about an hour between takes.”

To make the young actor laugh, director Bob Clark would hide on the set with Ian’s mother, the two cracking jokes and making farting noises from their mouths. What came out was genuine elation and a memorable laugh. The sound of his giggle has stuck with fans of the film, and consequently has become unshakable to the now-adult Ian.

“People will come up to me and they’ll ask me to do the laugh or recite a line from the film,” he says. “I always tell them I can’t. First of all, I’m in my thirties and it’s just not going to sound the same. Some people get kind of pissed about it, like ‘Why can’t you do it? Why won’t you do it?’ and I tell them, ‘Because it’s not going to sound the same! That’s just how it is.’”

Clark seemed to have a very simple rule when it came to directing kid actors: if they think it’s funny, it probably is. As a result, all the young actors were encouraged to experiment on the set and make suggestions to help enhance a scene. “There was a lot of play that we got to do,” Ian says. “It wasn’t really acting. We didn’t have to think too much; we just did it and had a lot of fun.”

Tedde Moore also had an enjoyable time during the Toronto shoot. Though her scenes in the film were shot in St. Catharines, the actress did have a scene on the soundstage several weeks after her initial *Christmas Story* stint wrapped. Moore appeared alongside Melinda Dillon and Darren McGavin in a sequence that was cut before the movie's theatrical release. The original shooting script indicates that after Ralphie writes his theme about how much he wants a Red Ryder BB gun for Christmas, a fantasy sequence follows. Miss Shields makes her way to the Parker house to sing Ralphie's praises and help make the case for him to get his desired Christmas gift. Before she leaves, she gives the parents clear instructions: "If you have any questions about what I have just said, please write them in a theme of 100 words or less for Ralph to deliver to me at school," she said. "I will grade it and return it by next Friday."

Even though the scene didn't survive in the finished film, traces of it did remain in another one of Ralphie's dream sequences. "There's that scene where I'm dressed in a hat and an old-fashioned dress and I'm going 'A+, A+, A+,' which apparently comes out of nowhere," Moore says. "Why am I dressed this way? That's the way Ralphie saw me in his fantasies — a ginormous, imposing woman. I dressed in the same costume in the cut scene where I went to his house."

Even though she has no cinematic record of the experience, she still regards working with Darren McGavin as one of the best experiences making the movie. "He rarely had a chance to play a theatrical scene in his movie life, so we just had a ball," she says fondly.

A number of other scenes were also cut from *A Christmas Story* before it was released. Reportedly, the "director's cut" version of the film clocked in at close to two hours. MGM argued that it should be shortened by a half hour, in order to have more screenings in movie theaters. While an alternate opening sequence was also cut (it was an extended version of Jean Shepherd's narration over establishing shots of steel mills), the bulk of the scenes that were cut

Darren McGavin  
© Ian Petrella





Dwayne McClean (center) as Black Bart with his young bandits © Ian Petrella

were Ralphie's fantasy sequences. From a practical standpoint, cutting those scenes could be done with minimal impact to the plot. For example, a sequence in which Ralphie rescues Santa Claus on the roof of a fairytale home was removed near the end of the film. The jolly gift-giver is about to be robbed by Black Bart and his band of brigands, but they prove to be no match for the tyke with a toy rifle.

The most significant cut to the movie was an elaborate big-budget sequence in which Ralphie frees Flash Gordon from the stronghold of Ming the Merciless. Careful observers of the movie may have noticed that the end credits reference this scene even though it doesn't appear in the finished version of the film.



Filming the deleted Santa Claus fantasy scene  
© Ian Petrella

“A good chunk of the budget went into that thing ’cause it was a huge set that they had built,” Peter Billingsley says. “They had me in a little silver bikini and I was palling up with a space hero, taking on a big alien with a gun.”

Billingsley may have been happy that the world didn’t get to see him in his silver getup, but one person was unhappy about the decision to cut the elaborate sequence — Paul Hubbard, the actor who played Flash Gordon. “I read for it a few times,” he says. “It was just an amazing set, very extensive. Mr. Clark spared no expense. I was thrilled when I saw the version with all our scenes intact. I was over the moon, and I was flabbergasted when I was told that a number of scenes were taken out. I never found out what the reason was.”

Not only did he not know the reason, but he didn’t find out his scene was taken out of the movie until a few weeks before Christmas, after the movie was already released in theaters. “My brother went to go see it and told me,” he says. “I had young kids at the time and we were working on the nursery, so it took me a little while before I could see it for myself.”



Peter Billingsley and Paul Hubbard in the deleted Flash Gordon scene © MGM/UA Entertainment / Photofest

Even though he wasn't in the movie, his name still appears in the end credits. According to Hubbard, that was an act of generosity on the part of Christmas Tree Films, which enabled the actor to continue to receive royalty checks for his performance, even though it was cut. Three decades later, *A Christmas Story* remains a high point of his career, even though few have seen his work on the project. "It was a blast doing it," he said. "I worked with great people and it was a great shoot. I was very proud to have been involved."

While MGM is most frequently blamed for the cuts to the film, director Bob Clark maintains that the final decision to take scenes out of the movie was his. "I cut [them] out," he said in 2003. "I had complete control of the film. In the first running of the film [they] should have been cut. We were storied out and we were ready to get on with our adventure."

Even if the film was stronger due to the cuts, many held out hope that one of the DVD releases of the movie would include the previously unseen footage. Tedde Moore was among those disappointed when she learned the deleted scenes would most likely never see the light of day.

"I was so delighted when I heard they were releasing the special edition of the DVD," she recalls. "I assumed my scene with Darren McGavin would be included. I phoned Bob and was heartbroken."

"We don't have it," Clark said.

"What do you mean?"

"The footage. We didn't save it. It doesn't exist."

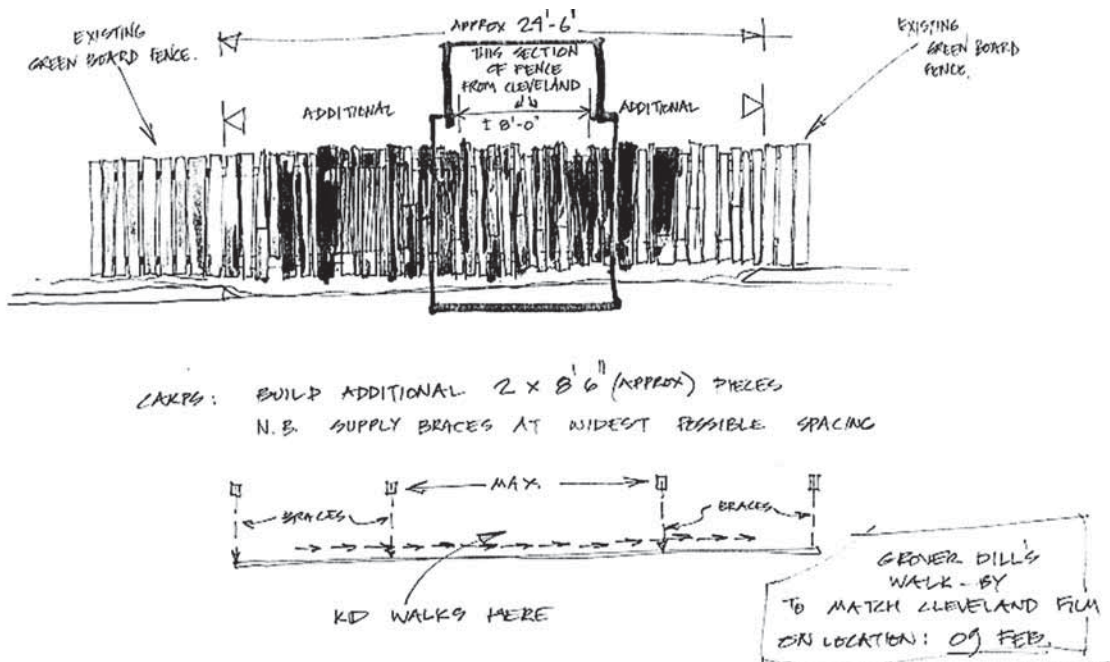
And with that, nearly twenty minutes of one of the most popular holiday films of all time became reduced to nothing more than a memory for a select few.

The shots outside of the Parker home were filmed in Cleveland, but all of the interior shots were completed on the Toronto soundstage. In some cases,

like during the filming of the infamous leg lamp scene, this had the potential of causing a continuity nightmare for the actors since some brief sequences were shot in two different countries weeks apart. For example, the scene in which the Old Man is standing on the street along with his curious neighbor Swede, played with a Southern accent by Bob Clark in a Hitchcockian cameo, was filmed over a month after the interior shots. This sequence, which ranks as the favorite of Peter Billingsley and millions of *Christmas Story* fans worldwide, is memorable because of the sexy fishnet-covered porcelain leg that the Old Man receives as his major award. Reuben Freed, the production designer on the film, submitted sketches to Jean Shepherd until the writer settled on one that was agreeable to him.



The Bumpus hounds and their handlers © Ian Petrella



Reuben Freed's sketch for the alleyway scene. Notice a piece was brought to Canada from Cleveland for continuity. © Reuben Freed



While designing the leg, the production designer started with the description in Shepherd's original short story "My Old Man and the Lascivious Special Award That Heralded the Birth of Pop Art," which first appeared in Shepherd's anthology *In God We Trust, All Others Pay Cash*. The leg was described as being similar to the type used in Nehi — pronounced

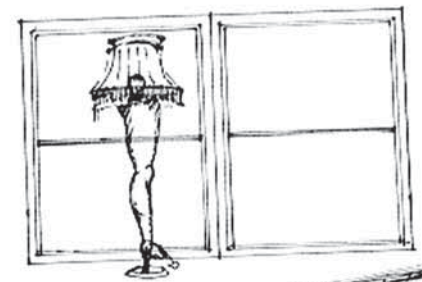
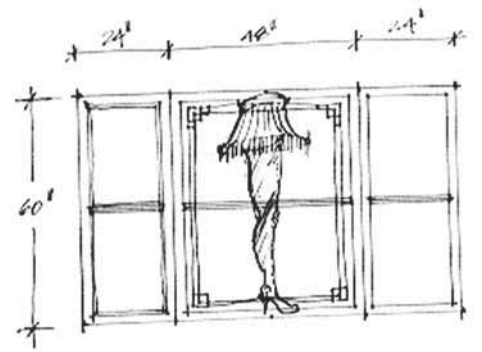
“knee-high,” get it? — soda company advertisements during the 1920s. Freed was also able to glean some inspiration from the 1976 *Phantom of the Open Hearth* PBS special, which marked the first time Shep’s short story was adapted for the screen, as well as the first appearance of the iconic lamp.

The main holdup in designing the lamp was what type of lampshade the appendage would wear. Several different styles were designed for Shepherd’s approval, but the winning sketch was one that was reminiscent of an actual lamp Freed had in his childhood home. “I immediately thought of something I had seen in my mother’s front room, which was sort of a gold-colored silk lampshade, pleated with fringe all around it,” he says.

In total, three legs were made for production. Finding an original leg lamp has been considered the holy grail for *Christmas Story* fans, but the likelihood of finding one is about as great as locating Pee-wee Herman’s bicycle in the basement of the Alamo. According to those involved in the production, all the lamps were destroyed during filming and none exists to this day.

While filming on the soundstage was relatively smooth sailing, one major distraction frequently got in the way of production — Jean Shepherd. The writer was often on the set while filming was underway, but instead of being a silent observer, he would pull the actors aside and give them direction. Director Bob Clark considered this a massive interference, and the two would often get into squabbles on the set.

“Listen, Pete,” Shepherd would say, before making a beeline over to Peter Billingsley and giving him some suggestions to improve his performance. Clark would come running over as Shepherd walked away: “What did he just tell you?” The kid would reiterate the contradictory notes he’d just received to his director, who would immediately become incensed. He’d make his way over to Shepherd, who would casually be thumbing through his script on the other side of the room. “Jean, we can’t *do* that, we just set this up!”



Reuben Freed’s original leg lamp design  
© Reuben Freed



“Jean drove Bob Clark nuts,” says Scott Schwartz. “It was hysterical. There was never any specific heated argument or anything like that. It was just fun, wacky shit where Bob have to go, ‘Listen, Jean, do me a favor, will ya? You can’t tell him something in the middle of the scene.’”

Ultimately, Clark had to ask Shepherd to stop coming to the set so they could remain on schedule. The young actors were fairly oblivious to the growing extent of their annoyance with each other, but looking back, they understand that Shepherd meant well.

“They were both so invested,” Peter Billingsley says. “[They] had been with this a long time and had worked so hard.”

“This is his life. This is his story,” Ian Petrella says. “I’m sure he probably had a lot to say and he contributed as much as he could.”

While the interior shots were being completed at Madger Studios, several exterior shots were being done throughout Toronto. Shepherd was still on the set when the fight between Ralphie and Scut Farkus was shot, and the writer once again had some very specific feedback for the young star.

“When I beat up the bully, [Jean] specifically wrote out [what I was supposed to say phonetically],” Billingsley says. “I still remember the beginning. There are some things from this movie that won’t get out of my head. He wrote me three cards and told me to memorize it. He told me not to just try and get through it.”

The young actor may have been able to get away with using faux-profanity during that scene, but when it came time to shoot the big “Oh, fudge!” sequence by the Cherry Street



(Above) Filming the soap poisoning scene © Ian Petrella  
(Below) Jean Shepherd, c. 1972 © Photofest



Ian Petrella  
and Peter  
Billingsley  
© Ian Petrella

Bridge in Toronto on Valentine’s Day, 1983, the young actor got a chance to say “the queen mother of dirty words — the f-dash-dash-dash word.” According to Billingsley, they filmed the sequence with him saying both versions of the profane word. The censored version was used for the audio, while the explicit version was used for the video to give the impression that Ralphie was really going to say it.

Filming wrapped on March 18. With a holiday deadline looming, Clark and his editor Stan Cole got to work. Carl Zittler and Paul Zaza started on the score, which incorporated a mix of holiday tunes from period artists like Bing Crosby and the Andrews Sisters, classical music from composers like Prokofiev and Tchaikovsky, and original music cues. The rest of the cast and crew considered the project a part of their past and assumed that, as with most projects, it would be another footnote in their careers. If someone had told them that they would still be talking about *A Christmas Story* three decades later, none of them would have believed it.



Peter Billingsley and Ian Petrella © Ian Petrella

Caseen Gaines is a pop culture enthusiast. His first book, *Inside Pee-wee's Playhouse: The Untold, Unauthorized, and Unpredictable Story of a Pop Phenomenon*, received the praise and recognition of journalists from *Ain't It Cool News*, *The Advocate*, *The Village Voice*, *In Touch Weekly*, and a host of other publications. The book won a Silver Medal at the 2012 Independent Publisher Book Awards in their Popular Culture/Leisure category. Gaines is a high school English teacher and the cofounder of Hackensack Theatre Company. He lives in New Jersey.