Application for North Carolina Highway Historical Marker

Applications must be complete, clear, and organized. All facts and statements must be documented with primary sources that were written at the time of the event and secondary sources that put the subject in context. Primary sources include letters, deeds, newspaper articles, or meeting minutes that might substantiate the historical information in the application. In addition, the applicant needs to locate secondary sources, such as published scholarly articles or books. Photocopies must include citations: the title, author, and date of publication.

Photocopies of all documentation must be submitted with the application. For scanning purposes, please use paperclips rather than staples. Scanned applications and documentation are welcome and appreciated.

A. Subject of proposed marker:

James Kern "Kay" Kyser
1905-1985

B. Site to be marked:

The location of the former Kyser home in downtown Rocky Mount.

C. Proposed location of marker on numbered, state-maintained highway: *(Be specific. Please provide street address or closest intersection. Note whether the site lies within the corporate limits of a city or town. An attached map of the location would be useful.)*

Attached is a satellite map of the proposed location on Sunset Avenue, near the corner of Church Street. The 1908 Hill's Directory has the Kyser address as 229 Sunset Avenue while the 1925 Directory has it as 219. Regardless, multiple sources, including the Methodist church which bought the property, say that the "shed," which I have circled on the picture, was a building out back and on the property of the original Kyser home. Therefore, it seems appropriate for the marker to be in front of the outbuilding next to the road on Sunset Avenue, which is 64 Business. I have marked that with an X.

D. Distance and direction from the proposed location to the site to be marked: *(for example, 100 yards S.E.)*

It seems appropriate for the sign to read something like "on this site" since it would have been right there.

E. Historical essay (use this space to help us understand the subject and the context, you may also write a proposed marker text):

At one point in the 1940s, Kay Kyser was considered at least as popular as Bob Hope and he made more money than big band leader Glenn Miller. Yet, today, many people, including those here in North Carolina don't know who Kay Kyser was. It's ironic because Kyser, very proud of his roots, always touted his home state and his hometown. Kyser, known for his humor and for leading a big band, starred in seven feature films, mostly as himself, and appeared in at least two others. He was able to work "Rocky Mount, North Carolina!" into all his movies. Radio was his biggest vehicle for

success however as he hosted his own program called, "Kay Kyser's Kollege of Musical Knowledge" which started in the mid-1930s in Chicago on WGN and then moved to New York after about a year where it was a hit for NBC for more than a decade. Dressed as an old-timey professor and known as "The Ol' Perfessor," Kyser greeted listeners with his trademark words "Evenin', folks. How y'all?" Often contestants were asked a "true-false" question. If the answer were true and the contestant said false, Kyser enthusiastically shouted, "That's right, you're wrong!" And the other way around, he would shout, "That's wrong, you're right." Kyser, whose band had 74 top 20 hits, including 11 Billboard No. 1 songs, was named to the Radio Hall of Fame in 1990, five years after his death.

During World War II, Kyser was the first entertainer of note to perform for the troops and amazingly he made more than 1,100 appearances at military bases, many overseas and reportedly at his own expense. That's more than any other performer including Bob Hope. He also organized a tour of celebrities called the "Hollywood Victory Caravan" - which included many stars such as Fred Astaire and Lucille Ball - in order to raise money for war bonds. The effort raised more than $1 billion. A study during World War II showed that North Carolina received a huge number of draft rejections due to the poor health of its citizens, in comparison to other states. Kyser's subsequent dedication to helping start North Carolina's Good Health program resulted in the talents of well-known musicians, radio personalities, and film stars - such as NC's own Ava Gardner, George Burns and Gracie Allen - being recruited for a public awareness campaign. Even after performing and raising money, biographers indicate that he felt guilty seeing Americans give their lives for the country while he made so much money. He began to be more and more philanthropic and finally retired altogether to devote his life to worthy causes.

With his wife, singer Georgia Carroll, he moved to Chapel Hill and got involved in many philanthropic efforts which included helping (along with Bill Friday and Billy Carmichael) to start the state's first public television station in 1952 as well as North Carolina's Highway Safety Program (according to biographer Steven Beasley). But those contributions have largely been forgotten. I could find no mention of Kyser on the North Carolina gov website. Plus, while Kyser is mentioned on the UNC-TV history page, Beasley told me a story about a retrospective on public broadcasting that did not mention him. Despite doing a good deal of fundraising, his name was left out completely. His wife was furious but Kyser took it in stride. Beasley said, "Georgia asked Kay, 'Why aren't you angry about this?' and Kay replied, 'I know who did it and God knows who did it. That's all that matters.'" He was also a big supporter of the drama program at UNC, his alma mater, where he had been a cheerleader and wrote the song "Tar Heels on Hand," which is still played at various sporting events. Most of his attention eventually turned to health issues, where he raised money for hospitals and other public health programs. His own foot issues, along with believing his mother was saved from her death bed by Christian Science, led to his becoming a volunteer with the church. He remained very active with the church until he died of heart failure July 23, 1985.

Kyser's mother was the first registered female pharmacist in the state and his father was also a well-known local pharmacist. Award-winning journalist Vermont C. Royster was his cousin. Another cousin was dean of the graduate school at UNC. His brother was a chemistry professor at Carolina while his uncle opened the School of Pharmacy at UNC. But Kyser's fame eclipsed them all as he was known throughout the world before giving up his career to do good for other people. Beasley, who worked with Kyser's family on the biography, said, "Even though he'd been a famous person, he didn't care for the attention. He just wanted to serve his state. Like his show biz career, his contributions were eventually forgotten." This marker would be a way to keep his name and his contributions alive.

On a personal note, I'm not old enough to remember when he was a performer but I heard stories throughout the years. My grandmother used to sell items to Kyser Drug Store for them to re-sale. Probably the first time I ever saw Kay Kyser was when he and his wife were honorary guests at the Rocky Mount Centennial parade in 1967. When I went to UNC, I came across several mentions of him about what a big deal he was, and I got more and more interested. I watched his movies and talked to my relatives and others about what they remembered about him. He was still alive when I was in college and I found out where he lived. I kept threatening to go knock on the door and just tell

him who I was and to thank him for everything he'd done. I kept thinking of reasons why I shouldn't do it, not the least of which was fear of getting, what might come across as, strangely emotional. I never did get the gumption to do it. Fast forward to several months ago, people from Rocky Mount were on Facebook talking about Kay Kyser and some people chimed in that they had never heard of him. I took part in the conversation and discovered that there was no permanent recognition of Kyser in Rocky Mount. Having coordinated the efforts of the N.C. Bar Association, where I was director of communications, to get an historic marker across from the Capitol several years ago, it immediately popped out to me that Kay Kyser should have an historic marker in Rocky Mount. So, I undertook the effort without realizing until I started writing this that I'm probably trying to make up for never telling him thank you. Anyway, Kay Kyser needs to be permanently thanked and remembered in the town that he loved.

I have contacted Rocky Mount's mayor, David Combs, and he is excited about the effort, and has agreed to lend his support in any way. He said, "It is important for smaller cities like Rocky Mount to recognize individuals that have had international success. It is part of our heritage and history that we need to embrace so that as younger people grow up in our community they can believe that they can also have success."

As with the NCBA marker, I am happy to help with the wording of this marker, should you approve it. Below are several of my initial ideas. The first one appears to be Mayor Combs favorite so far. Thank you for your time and efforts.

James Kern "Kay" Kyser
1905-1985

Humorous big band leader, humanitarian, radio & movie star was raised in a home on this site.

Born in Rocky Mount, the humorous big band leader, radio and movie star, was raised in a home on this site.

Beloved Rocky Mount native, humorous big band leader, radio & movie star, was raised in a home on this site.

Humorous big band leader, radio & movie star who never forgot his roots was raised in home on this site.

Witty big band leader, the first entertainer to play for U.S. troops in WWII, was raised in a home on this site.

Witty movie star and big band leader, who had 46 top 10 hits, was raised in a home on this site.

Humorous movie star and big band leader, who had 74 top 20 hits, was raised in a home on this site.

Witty movie/radio star and big band leader, who topped the charts 11 times, was raised in a home on this site.

Popular entertainer of the 1930s & 1940s, the witty big band leader was raised in a home on this site.

Famous band leader, philanthropist, movie star and showman was raised in a home on this site.

*** Note: I'm trying to determine if he were also born in the house.**

F. Bibliography: *(primary and secondary sources)*

Steven Beasley, biographer: https://www.facebook.com/KAY-KYSER-THE-OLPROFESSOR-OF-SWING-AMERICAS-FORGOTTEN-SUPERSTAR-214756188829/

https://www.kaykyser.net/

http://finding-aids.lib.unc.edu/05289/

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http://blogs.lib.unc.edu/shc/index.php/2014/05/06/its-all-up-to-you-north-carolina-and-the-good-health-program-part-1/

http://otrarchive.blogspot.com/2010/04/kay-kysers-kollege-of-musical-knowledge.html

http://tsort.info/music/7nxwn7.htm

https://www.ibiblio.org/kaykyser/life/keeping_the_faith.html

http://kaykyserchristianscienceassoc.org/biography/

http://www.unctv.org/content/about/history

https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Kay_Kyser

http://www.ncpedia.org/biography/kyser-james-kern-kay

https://www.google.com/maps/@35.9428001,-77.7981343,71m/data=!3m1!1e3

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