

JACK BENNY'S SPONSORS

BY BILL OATES

The history of Jack Benny on the radio is famous, but what were the origins of this famous radio comedian's sponsors? From Canada Dry to LSMFT, the products emerged and entered American households, sometimes as rapidly as the fate of the boy from Waukegan grew and prospered.

Someone had to be first to take a chance on Jack Benny, and that call came to Canada Dry, the "champagne of ginger ale" product. Two generations after soda water had been first mixed with cola concoctions, this Canadian company tried to compete with soda bottlers in America. Founded by John J. McLaughlin in the 1880's in Toronto, McLaughlin's Breakfast Style Ginger Ale (dark) and Pale Dry Ginger Ale (lighter color and flavor) scored a hit. Canadians preferred the lighter variety and it was soon exported to the U.S. as Canada Dry.

The cost to ship the beverage to the States created problems. Coke was selling at five cents per bottle, but Canada Dry had to charge thirty-five cents. The wealthy were the primary consumers of this upscale drink when they used it as a mixer in Prohibition highballs. Sales fell after the 1929 stockmarket crash, and so, the company decided to lower costs by creating a franchise system like Coca Cola's in the U.S.

Sales improved as the company became the number one seller of ginger ale in the country. Canada Dry expanded its product line to include the mixers club soda and quinine water (tonic). Jack became the "Canada Dry Humorist" from his first broadcast in May 1932, until he moved to NBC in October of that year and was adopted by Chevy.

General Motors' Chevrolet resulted, in part, because of a lost auto race. William Durant, an early automobile developer, raced Frenchman Louis Chevrolet and lost. Later, after Chevrolet developed an engine for Durant, the two created the first in a long line of Chevrolets in 1913. The name was chosen because race car drivers were heroes of the day and the foreign name had a nice sound to it. Because the president of G.M. did not find Benny funny, sponsorship was dropped.

General Tire's tire production history is less glamorous and but a small part of Jack Benny's career. Suffice it to say, that after Americans unhitched their horses and propelled tin lizzies like the Chevy and Benny's Maxwell down the streets, the makers of tires were wheeling right behind. Started by Akron, Ohio residents B.F. Goodrich, Charles Goodyear, and Harvey Firestone, the tire industry had many who offered smooth rides and, ultimately, puncture proof tires. Generals were manufacturerd, literally, down the road from Goodyear and sought to own a bigger stake in the market with its radio sponsorship of the Benny show, even though it was only for one season.

General Foods adopted Jack Benny in the fall of 1935 and assigned its relatively successful JELL-O dessert product to the show. This was the third "general" to sponsor Jack, who said, "Having three generals in a row ain't bad for a guy who was in the Navy, not the Army."

The patent origin of gelatin harkens back to pre-Civil War years in the Eastern U.S. Peter Cooper, inventor of the famed railroad engine "Tom Thumb," got the first patent on a product which had been the subject of experimentation since 1682.



LUCKY STRIKE CIGARETTES sponsored Jack Benny and Mary Livingstone for twenty years on radio and TV.

It wasn't until 1897 that Pearl B. Wait toyed with gelatine derived from boiling horse hooves, bones, and tendons and turned it into dessert. His wife named the substance JELL-O, but we are not sure why. It may have reminded her of jelly and she replaced the last syllable with a then popular product ending -O; she may have given it a name that represented the jelling process that had to occur; or perhaps she was a bad speller and substituted a "j" for the "g" in gelatine.

The business did not assume the role of "#1 Selling Dessert" in America overnight. Wait tired of his unprofitable venture and sold out for \$450 to neighbor Francis Woodward, a moderately successful seller of the "medicated nest egg" (killed hen lice) and creator of a cereal beverage called Grain-O. The new gelatine "nest egg" was a slow mover for a while and was even offered to a plant supervisor for \$35. The employee declined

and soon after, JELL-O's fortunes started to climb, first to \$250,000 in sales in 1902 and then to near one million in 1906. Grain-O was dropped as a product to make way for JELL-O in strawberry, raspberry, lemon, orange, cherry, peach, and chocolate (at least those were the flavors in the early years.)

Because Jack Benny was so successful pushing JELL-O, General Foods, the company that resulted from the merger of products manufactured by cereal baron C.W. Post and JELL-O in 1925, decided that its Grape-Nuts breakfast food could use a boost from the highly successful comedy. So, in 1941, Jack dropped his now famous "Jell-O again, this is Jack Benny talking."

The ownership of Grape-Nuts might have been altered in its early years. The Kellogg company could have had both Post Toasties and Grape-Nuts in its fold, but when C.W. Post offered Dr. Kellogg his expertise in marketing a health food coffee, the latter declined. Post set out to start his own empire of Postum and cereal. Grape-Nuts was originally bread sticks made of wheat and malted barley baked together. Sold as a health food, Post's product was named because he felt that grape sugar was formed in the baking process, and the cereal did have a nutty consistency.

On October 1, 1944, The American Tobacco began a long and lucky acquaintance with Jack Benny. Lucky Strikes stayed with Jack, not only through his final days on radio, but also for his early television years.

Tobacco, of course, was a plant cultivated and enjoyed by American Indians for centuries, but the white settler, and one in particular, found out how to market it. One Confederate soldier, Washington Duke of Durham, North Carolina, returned home after Union imprisonment during the Civil War with fifty cents and found a half burned barn of tobacco as his sole marketable farm commodity. He took it to Raleigh, sold it, and began what would become the largest

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tobacco manufacturer in the world. By 1881, he had hand-rolled cigarettes for sale, and nine years later The American Tobacco Company was born of mergers of four small companies (to be divided again in 1911 when the government felt this company was a monopoly.) When Duke died in 1925, he willed \$40 million to the university that bears his name.

Lucky Strikes were not the first of Duke's cigarettes, but the first of a new blend of tobaccos. The name came from an old plug tobacco brand that originated in 1856. It represented what the tobacco-chewing gold miners expected to hit after the Rush of '49. In 1916, the name re-emerged as a rolled smoke, but did not reach first place in cigarette sales for a few years.

Company president George Washington Hill is credited with Luckies' success. His advertising campaigns included "Reach for a Lucky," "With Men Who Know Tobacco Best, It's Luckies Two to One," and the auctioneer booming "Sold American!" He is responsible for "Your Hit Parade," the twenty-five year running radio and television show, as well as buying out the Jack Benny show.

The green color of the original Lucky Strike pack caused a minor problem during World War II and another advertising coup. Copper was used in the dominant

green ink on the package, but this metal was in short supply during the War, and so, the background color was changed to white. The advertising that explained the packaging change won mass approval when it was announced that "Lucky Strike Green Has Gone to War." In six weeks sales rose thirty-eight percent.

Prior to his death in 1946, Hill created his last great Lucky Strike "extra." "Lucky Strike Means Fine Tobacco" came from his fertile mind, and was so well recognized that by 1944, only "L.S.M.F.T." was needed to identify the popular smokes. Hill later had the letters printed on the bottom of the package, where they reside to this day.

Luckies went with Jack Benny into television and the radio images of speed reading auctioneers and the Sportsmen singing how "Luckies Taste Better" were created for the audience with the young black and white cameras. But this was the last of an era, when sponsor and artist worked closely to develop a show. Later, sponsors would merely "buy time;" Jack Benny and the never-ending plots with Jack trying to schmooze with the sponsor until all parties signed on the dotted lines were finished. Lever Brothers and State Farm Insurance made the final payments for *The Jack Benny Show* which left CBS in 1964.

The era of American originals being easily identified with the programs they sponsored died after communications became more complex and more expensive. Gone were entire shows sponsored by one company that was not too many generations away from its beginnings in the minds of the nineteenth century visionaries. After *The Jack Benny Show* left its Sunday night time slot, television changed and seldom would a product such as JELL-O or LSMFT single-handedly sponsor one show.

The information in this article is culled from a variety of sources, but the most used, and a fun book to peruse, is Why Did They Name It? by Hannah Campbell (NY: Fleetwood Publishing Company, 1964.)

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