

Syndicating Amos 'n' Andy

By KARL PEARSON

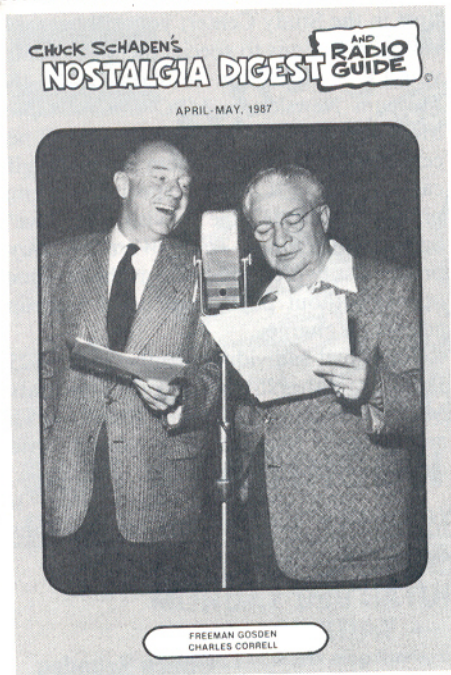
In the early days of radio, "Amos 'n Andy" was one of the airwave's most popular programs. And during the years of its greatest popularity, Freeman Gosden and Charles Correll, the creators and stars of the program, broadcast the series from Chicago.

The story of "Amos 'n Andy" also began here in Chicago. Gosden and Correll's local radio career began in March, 1925 as a song-and-patter team over station WEBH, which broadcast from studios in the Edgewater Beach Hotel. Later that year station WGN, owned by the *Chicago Tribune*, was looking for a singing team. As a matter of fact, the station almost hired Marion and Jim Jordan, later known as "Fibber McGee and Molly" but instead hired Gosden and Correll, also

using the pair to do occasional writing and announcing chores. So in November of the same year Gosden and Correll moved their act from the Edgewater Beach Hotel to the Drake Hotel, where WGN's studios were located.

After a few weeks at WGN, the station suggested a change in programming for the team. The station's management felt that there were already many singing teams already heard over the airwaves and suggested a change for the duo. WGN's station manager proposed that the pair do a radio version of Sydney Fisher's popular Chicago Tribune comic strip "The Gumps," which featured the daily exploits of Andy Gump and his family. Gosden and Correll thought it was a fine idea, but both felt they were incapable of doing such a show as neither were married or had children (at the time). Instead the two came up with an idea of their own: a series based on two Southern blacks who came north to Chicago, and their everyday experiences in the big city. Their title for the proposed series was "Sam 'n Henry".

At first the management of the station did not take to the idea, but WGN finally agreed to it and on January 12, 1926 "Sam 'n Henry" made its debut. Gosden played Sam, the hard-working, loyal, trusting one and Correll played Henry, the schemer, who was always looking for the easy way out of things, but deep down a good and honest person. The program was announced by WGN's sales manager, Bill Hay, who opened the ten minute broadcast every night with the brief announcement: "10 p.m. WGN. Sam 'n Henry".





For the first few weeks the show, which was heard six nights a week, did not attract much of an audience, but then the program's popularity began to pick up. The pair would hear people on the streets of Chicago talking about last night's broadcast. The continuing story line seemed to be addictive to listeners. "Sam 'n Henry" developed a huge following in the Chicago area. The Victor Talking Machine Company recorded the pair for Victor Records. And Gosden and Correll had greater ideas for the program.

In the second year of "Sam 'n Henry" Gosden and Correll brought a novel idea to the management of WGN: pre-recording and syndication of the program. The idea was simple: why not arrange to pre-record the programs several weeks in advance? The recordings would then be shipped to stations around the country, who would in turn play them on the night of the live WGN broadcast. The station was opposed to the idea, and claimed exclusive rights to the "Sam 'n Henry" name. Gosden and Correll felt there was a brighter future in syndication and left the station when their contract expired, presenting the last "Sam 'n Henry" program over WGN on

December 18, 1927. The pair would move their characters, if not the names to the Chicago Daily News Station, WMAQ.

On March 19, 1928 the pair premiered their new series, now titled "Amos 'n Andy", from the WMAQ studios in the Chicago Daily News Building. "Sam" (played by Gosden) became "Amos" while "Henry" (Correll) became "Andy". The fraternal organization to which the pair belonged, known as "The Jewel Of The Crown" on WGN, became "The Mystic Knights Of The Sea" on WMAQ. Bill Hay was still announcing, having followed the pair over to WMAQ, where he became Sales Director of that station.

And they also began recording the program for syndication. The recordings were done in the studios of the Marsh Recording Laboratories in Chicago. Marsh was one the pioneers in electrical recording, having issued the first electrical recordings on their Autograph label. Gosden and Correll had the programs pressed on two sides of a 12-inch 78 RPM shellac disc, as some stations were not yet equipped with dual turntables. The pair recorded just the main body (story portion) of the program—there were no opening or closing announcements or music, as these would be added by the local station. The two also devised a way to make the pause in which the engineer would turn over the disc sound more natural and not at all like an obvious switch. Just before the end of the first disc, Andy, usually in a discussion with Amos, would say "now, hold on there" or "wait just a minute, Amos". The local announcer knew that was his cue to switch records, and listeners just assumed that Andy was pausing before continuing.

"Amos 'n Andy" was an immediate hit in the Chicago area, in addition to those other parts of the country where

AMOS 'N' ANDY

the program was syndicated. In fact the program became so popular that in 1929 the assistant general manager of the Lord and Thomas advertising agency suggested to company president Albert Lasker that one of its clients, Pepsodent Toothpaste, sponsor the program over one of the national networks. When Lasker contacted NBC about the possibility of air time he discovered that the network was eager to sign Gosden and Correll as NBC was competing with the pair through their syndication "network"!

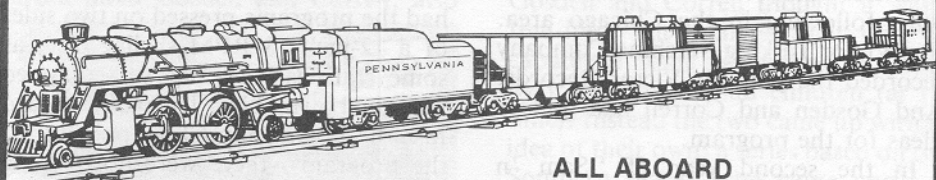
They were offered a lucrative contract by NBC, and on August 19, 1929, "Amos 'n Andy" made it's debut at 10 p.m. Central time over the NBC-Blue network. The program was still heard in Chicago over WMAQ, which is an interesting sidelight since WMAQ was

a CBS affiliate at the time; WBBM and WGN were the Chicago NBC affiliates! But Gosden and Correll were loyal to WMAQ, and the show was still broadcast from WMAQ's Chicago studios, first in the Daily News Building and later from the Merchandise Mart, by which time WMAQ had become an NBC affiliate.

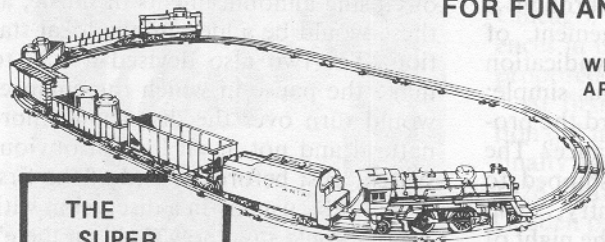
The program became an even bigger hit, this time with audiences nationwide. The reason was simple: listeners related to the everyday experiences of Amos and Andy. When the country went through the stock market crash and the great depression that followed, Amos and Andy had the same experiences. Radio was providing free entertainment to many who could not afford to go out in those dark days. Amos and Andy went through many of the hard times that many Americans were experiencing.

LIONEL®

THE GREATEST NAME IN MODEL RAILROADING



ALL ABOARD FOR FUN AND EXCITEMENT



THE
SUPER
STORE!

WE BUY, SELL, SERVICE,
APPRAISE AND RESTORE
MODEL ELECTRIC
TRAINS, TRACKS,
AND ACCESSORIES
BY LIONEL, LBG,
AMERICAN FLYER,
MARX, KALAMAZOO,
WILLIAMS AND OTHERS.

Come In and Visit with Mike Moore
who loves to chat with you
about model railroading.

MILWAUKEE AT OAKTON
NILES • 470-9500

**Town
House
TV & Appliances**

The popularity of “Amos ’n Andy” grew by leaps and bounds. At the height of the program’s popularity, it was possible to walk down the street in a large city on a summer night and hear the program from open windows. The telephone company reported a dramatic drop in the number of phone calls made during the fifteen minutes the program was on the air. Movie theatres would stop motion pictures and play the program through loudspeakers in the theater. Eventually a motion picture (titled “Check And Double Check”—after one of the programs famous catch phrases) was produced. And two presidents (Hoover and Roosevelt) were known to be avid listeners to “Amos ’n Andy”.

The success behind the program lay exclusively with Gosden and Correll. The pair wrote every word in the script and played all the parts, using different pitch and microphone position for each character. The two knew the characters so well and felt that a rehearsal was not necessary—they felt that rehearsing might spoil the spontaneity of the program. And the characters were never presented in a dishonest or derogatory manner. Gosden and Correll had a great empathy for their creations. At the end of one particularly moving episode the two broke down and cried. During another program Correll began giggling at a funny situation and had to pour water on himself to stop laughing.

Listeners stayed with the pair throughout many episodes, such as the time Amos and Andy purchased The Fresh Air Taxicab Company; the problems the business faced during the depression; their dealings with the “Kingfish”, the “Ruler” of “The Mystic Knights of The Sea”; the time when Amos’ fiancée, Ruby Taylor, almost died of pneumonia; when Andy was being sued by Madame Queen for breach of promise; and the time when



Andy was wrongfully accused of murder. Gosden and Correll found themselves written “into a corner” on the last situation. Public outcry was great against Andy being convicted. But they wrote their way out of it; just as the jury foreman began to read the verdict, an alarm clock rang out; it turned out that Amos had dreamed the whole thing!

NBC found themselves in a bind with the 10 p.m. Central Time, as listeners in New York complained that the 11 p.m. Eastern Time was too late for many. So NBC moved the time to 7 p.m. Eastern Time. But then west coast listeners began to complain that many were unable to get home in time to hear a 4 p.m. broadcast! Gosden and Correll realized that was a problem for west coast listeners and agreed to do a repeat broadcast three hours later for the west coast.

“Amos ’n Andy”—and Gosden and Correll—remained in Chicago until 1936, at which time they moved their base of operations to the west coast. The program is remembered as one of the nation’s most popular shows during radio’s early days, and Gosden and Correll as early radio innovators.

History will also note that “Amos ’n Andy” was a Chicago product.