### COVER STORY

## *The Roots of a Radio Legend*

# AMOS 'N' ANDY EXAMINED

### BY ELIZABETH MC LEOD

There is a radio program that was possibly the most influential in the history of American broadcasting.

OLD TIME RADIO IN THE 20TH CENTURY

This program was the first original serial to be devised for the broadcast medium.

This program was the first program to be distributed by syndication.

This program captured the attention of more than forty million Americans, six nights a week, at the peak of its success — nearly one-third of the nation's total population at that time.

And today, seventy years after its premiere, few programs make historians more uncomfortable.

Few programs are more worthy of serious analysis and yet many —even most — historians find it impossible to discuss this program objectively.

That program was *Amos 'n' Andy.*

The modern-day view of this series was summed up as early as 1972 by author William Manchester, who dismissed the program as "a nightly racial slur," and used its Depression-era popularity to illustrate the casual racism which pervaded that time.

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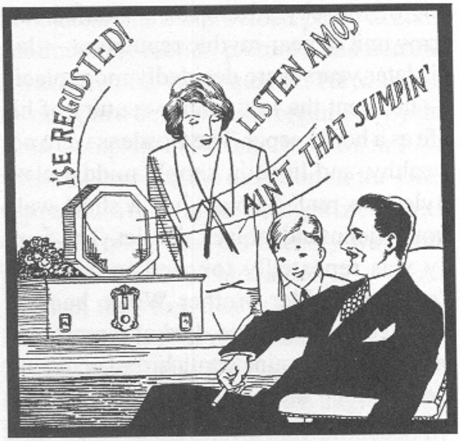
Since then, a popular view of *Amos 'n' Andy* has grown up which has little to do with the reality of the program itself. The very title has become a synonym for the excesses of burnt-cork minstrelsy, a catch-all term used to describe any foot-shuffling blackface stereotypes.

*Amos 'n' Andy,* in its original form, was none of those things.



History is not well served by the modern tendency to reshape the facts to fit modern perceptions, to interpret the past according to modern sensibilities. And yet, this is exactly what has occurred in most discussions of *Amos 'n' Andy* since the 1960s. Misperceptions and misinterpretations have been picked up by writer after writer, and incorrect conclusions are repeatedly drawn by commentators who know virtually nothing about the original series.

Clearly, a reevaluation of *Amos 'n' Andy* is needed — one which puts aside the emotional baggage the show has accumulated in recent decades, and which examines what, exactly, that Freeman Gosden and Charles Correll were trying to do.

A key point of misunderstanding in considering *Amos 'n' Andy* is the assumption that it is merely an elaboration on the themes of the old minstrel show. While Gosden and Correll had both appeared in amateur minstrel shows, neither man came out of an extended background of professional minstrelsy.

Freeman Fisher Gosden was born in Richmond, Virginia in 1899, the son of a Civil War veteran with a distinguished military record. Walter Gosden had served as one of Moseby's Rangers, a Confederate army unit of near-mythic reputation — but his later years were decidedly more placid — he spent the last quarter-century of his life as a bookkeeper. The Gosdens were not wealthy, and lived in simple middle-class style in a rented house just a short walk from Richmond's black district. The family was repeatedly touched by tragedy: Freeman's older brother Willie became addicted to drugs, and died of a morphine overdose on his nineteenth birthday, Walter Gosden died after a long illness in 1911, and in 1917 came an emotional blow that would scar Freeman for the rest of his life — his mother and sister were killed in an auto accident.

Young Freeman —known as "Curly" to his friends — sought refuge from his family's tragedies in local theatres: from an early age he was an enthusiastic patron of Richmond's small-time vaudeville houses, and quickly developed an interest in putting on shows of his own. In this he was aided by his closest childhood friend, a black youth named Garrett Brown.

Garrett lived with the Gosden family. By one account, his mother had been the family maid, and when she died, the Gosdens took on the responsibility of raising her son. He was probably a bit older than Freeman, but they shared similar personality traits: both were intelligent, quick-witted, and skilled observers of the people around them. Both were excellent mimics, and enjoyed imitating the various dialects heard around the Richmond streets and they took special pleasure in putting on impromptu shows for the entertainment of Freeman's ailing father. Often these performances took the form of minstrel shows with Garrett as end man, and Freeman as interlocutor. The boys swapped wisecracking comedy lines and told dialect jokes. Such collaborations continued until Garrett moved out on his own at the age of sixteen.

Freeman Gosden and Charles Correll

Freeman went on to gain a reputation as a budding entertainer, and occasionally appeared in amateur-night shows in Richmond theatres. On at least one occasion he moved from verbal to visual mimicry, and appeared as a Charlie Chaplin impersonator. On other occasions, he did eccentric dances in benefit shows. Despite his youth, Freeman was developing into a well-rounded entertainer, and when he joined the Navy in 1917, he became a frequent performer in shows put on by his fellow sailors.

Freeman Gosden and Charles Correll

Following his discharge in 1919, and following two unhappy stints as as a salesman, Freeman decided to pursue his interest in show business but in a behind-the-scenes capacity, joining the Joe Bren Company as a producer and director. The Bren company specialized in presenting local benefit shows in small towns and cities all over the East, South, and Midwest, usually in cooperation with local fraternal or civic groups. The local sponsors provided the talent, and the Bren company provided scripts, music, and production savvy. It was a busy job, and Freeman was constantly on the road.

It was in Durham, North Carolina in 1920 that Gosden met another Bren representative while putting on a show for the Durham Elks. Charlie Correll had been working for the company since 1918, and Gosden was assigned to work under Correll to get the hang of directing. It was a partnership that would last a lifetime.

Charles J. Correll was born in Peoria, Illinois in 1890. His father was a bricklayer, and the family was securely working-class. Like young Freeman Gosden, Charles Correll spent much of his boyhood soaking up smalltime vaudeville shows, and as a teenager earned a highly-prized job as an usher in a neighborhood theatre. He also studied piano, taking a few months' worth of lessons, and then learned to play quite well by ear.

After completing high school, Charles spent a year working as a stenographer — he had learned shorthand as part of his school's "commercial" course — and then devoted several years to learning his father's trade. While working in the construction business, however, Charles maintained an interest in the stage. He appeared in amateur shows, provided piano accompaniment for motion pictures, and became a member of a vocal quartet. He was performing in a benefit show organized by the Bren Company in Davenport, Iowa in 1918 when he came to the attention of the Bren representative who recognized both Correll's talent and his friendly way with people, and offered him a job.

When they first met in that Durham rehearsal hall in 1920, "Gos" and Charlie hit it off immediately. They soon began rooming together, and would often augment the local talent in the shows they produced by appearing on stage. Correll played the piano, and Gosden the ukulele as the pair harmonized on popular tunes of the day, supplemented by a bit of eccentric dancing from Gosden. Often these benefits were minstrel shows, and occasionally Gosden and Correll would include bits of blackface comic patter in their routines.

Correll and Gosden made an unusually well-matched team. Gosden was tall and lean, Correll was short and stocky. Gosden was rather shy around strangers, and spoke with a bit of a stammer, while Correll was outgoing, jovial, and loved to talk. And where Gosden was an intense, driven bundle of nervous energy, whose family tragedies had left him with an overwhelming need to control his environment, Correll was almost always calm and relaxed. Gosden soon became the dominant, innovative member of the team, while Correll provided a steady, stabilizing influence. Thanks to their complimentary personalities, the two quickly became fast friends — and ideal collaborators.

Freeman Gosden and Charles Correll

By 1925, Correll and Gosden had been transferred to the Bren Company's Chicago office, and their careers really began to move. While still working for Bren, they began performing on the side — parlaying occasional song-and-patter appearances on Chicago radio stations into a regular time slot on the Edgewater Beach Hotel's station WEBH. The pair hoped their radio work would lead to the stage and indeed, they were able to sell a collection of some of their best material to popular Chicago bandleader/entertainer Paul Ash. The resulting revue, "Red Hot," gave Correll and Gosden their first taste of big time success.

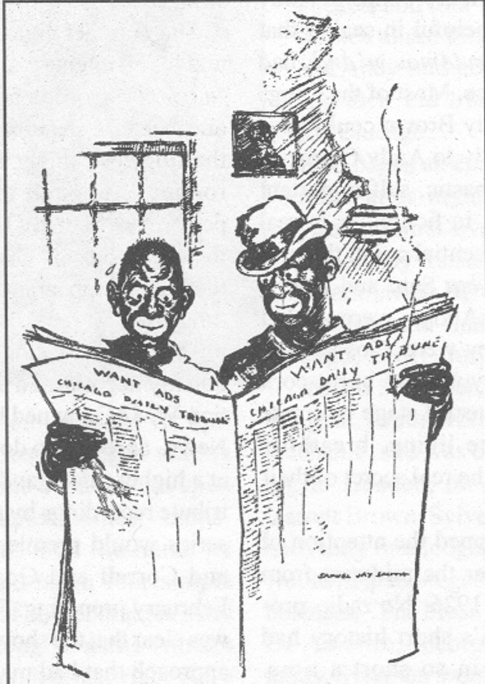
The success of "Red Hot" propelled Gosden and Correll to greater heights of popularity on radio, and in the fall of 1925, the boys were offered a staff position at WGN, the powerful Chicago Tribune station. This job enabled them to quit their positions at the Bren company, and for the first time they devoted their full attention to broadcasting.

At first, they were general utility men at WGN — they performed their harmony act five nights a week, and filled in wherever else they might be needed. But they hadn't been at the station long before they were approached with a proposition that would change their lives forever.

During the 1920s, the newspaper comic strip was in its golden age and beginning with Sidney Smith's "The Gumps" in 1919, a craze for continuity strips swept the nation. "The Gumps" was syndicated by the Tribune and WGN executive Ben McCanna began to think that what worked in print could work equally well on radio. The idea was revolutionary: radio drama was still in its infancy, and no one had ever tried what McCanna was suggesting: a continuing dramatization, to be aired six nights a week. Knowing of Gosden and Correll's skill with dialogue, McCanna approached them with the idea of adapting the strip for the air.

A word here would be in order about "The Gumps" and its place in the *Amos 'n' Andy* story. "The Gumps" was perhaps the first comic strip to use continuity in order to tell a dramatic story — and the themes treated in this strip and even its storytelling style would be echoed in later years by Gosden and Correll.

The strip was an acid-etched look at bourgeois America. Andy Gump, the chinless patriarch of the Gump family, was a grasping, amoral character always involved in petty scheming, and always striving to climb beyond his lower-middle-class station. His speech was bombastic and self-important, and his self-confidence seemed boundless, even when faced with the failure of his latest venture — and this tendency often made him an easy target for bunco artists. The storylines in "The Gumps" carried on for weeks at a time, with readers hanging on every panel, anxious, say, to learn whether the fabulously wealthy Uncle Bim would be enticed into an ill-advised marriage with the scheming Widow Zander.



*"Look heah Henry—read dis heah ad."*

Gosden and Correll quickly realized that adapting such a strip would be too much for them to handle. For one thing, female characters like Andy's wife Min, Tilda the Maid, and the Widow Zander were beyond their ability to portray. And neither man felt comfortable with the middle-class setting of the strip.

Instead, they decided to take the basic themes of "The Gumps" and adapt them to a storyline about "a couple of colored characters." This is not as arbitrary a choice as it might sound, and neither can it be explained simply by the fact that Gosden and Correll were familiar with blackface dialect. There were deeper, more topical reasons for their decision.

Since the World War, Chicago's black population had increased dramatically, as black men moved North in significant numbers, lured by the promise of industrial jobs. The "Great Migration" had been the topic of much discussion, and a vibrant black community had coalesced on Chicago's South Side. Gosden and Correll were intrigued by the dramatic possibilities offered by a story set in this community — the story of two young black men from the rural south seeking their fortunes in the big city. The serial format proposed by WGN seemed well-suited to telling such a story.

On the surface it might seem that this idea had taken Gosden and Correll a long way from "The Gumps." But by the time their first series, *Sam 'n' Henry* went on the air in January 1926, they had managed to work a lot of what had made the strip popular into their own creation.

Like "The Gumps," *Sam 'n' Henry* most often revolved its plots around money: how to get it and how to hold onto it. Like Andy Gump, Sam Smith and Henry Johnson often became involved with petty chiselers and confidence men, notably a fellow identified only as "The Most Precious Diamond," the head of a fraternal order called "The Jewels Of The Crown." And most of all, the character of Henry, played by Correll was very similar in personality to Andy Gump himself. Both were conceited windbags who didn't know as much as they thought they did. They talked big but could seldom live up to their boasting. While this characterization is a stock figure in much popular comedy, it seems very likely that the similarity between Andy Gump and Henry Johnson was not a coincidence. The similarity was well disguised by the setting of the radio program but is nevertheless quite obvious to anyone familiar with the comic character.

The Andy Gump/Henry Johnson/Andy Brown similarity is helpful in seeing that much of *Sam 'n' Henry/Amos 'n' Andy* had nothing to do with race. Most of the things that happened to Andy Brown could have happened just as easily to Andy Gump — or to any other bombastic, self-important fellow in the comics, in fiction, or in real life. And this is the essential point: the program wasn't about *what* Sam and Henry, and later Amos and Andy, were — but rather, about *who* they were. Gosden and Correll had gone beyond the burnt-cork caricatures of the minstrel stage to create characters who were living, breathing people and this was the real secret of their success.

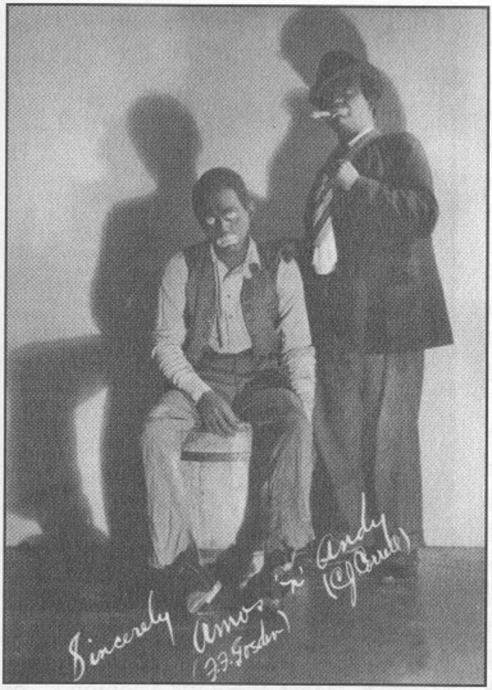
*Sam 'n' Henry* gripped the attention of radio listeners all over the midwest from its debut in January 1926. No radio program in the medium's short history had become so popular in so short a time. Gosden and Correll poured themselves into the show — writing all the scripts, playing all the characters, and squeezing in a grueling schedule of personal appearances to promote the program. They were unqualified hits and it didn't take the ever-innovative Gosden long to realize that what worked in Chicago could just as easily work all over the country.

To achieve this, Gosden suggested to WGN management that the show be recorded on phonograph discs which could then be leased to other stations. But WGN turned down the idea, fearing that the station would end up competing with itself. *Sam 'n' Henry*, by contract, was an exclusive WGN feature, and the company was determined to keep it that way. Correll and Gosden chafed at the dismissal of this idea which could have brought them considerably more exposure and, in turn, more money from personal appearances. But they were under contract thru the end of 1927, so there was little they could do but wait.

The contract ended in December 1927, and for all intents and purposes, so did *Sam 'n' Henry.* Gosden and Correll left WGN, and began a personal appearance tour of the midwest, doing their song and patter routine. Although they could no longer perform as "Sam 'n' Henry," they were able to weave bits of character dialogue into their stage appearances — just so long as the names weren't used.

This limbo wouldn't last long. The team quickly negotiated a deal with the rival station WMAQ, owned by the Chicago Daily News, agreeing to do a similar serial show at a higher salary, and with the right to distribute recordings by syndication. The new series would premiere in March of 1928 and Correll and Gosden spent much of February preparing. From the beginning it was clear that the show would take the same approach that had made *Sam 'n' Henry* so popular: character-driven drama with a humorous undertone. There were subtle changes but to anyone's ears it was clearly the same program that had been so popular at WGN.

The names proved the most difficult aspect of the new series. As originally written, the first two episodes told the story of "Jim Jones" and "Charley Brown." These names didn't quite fit, and episodes three and four changed "Jim 'n' Charley" to "Tom 'n' Harry." But Gosden still wasn't happy. To his painstaking ear for detail, the names just didn't work, didn't give precisely right impressions of the characters.



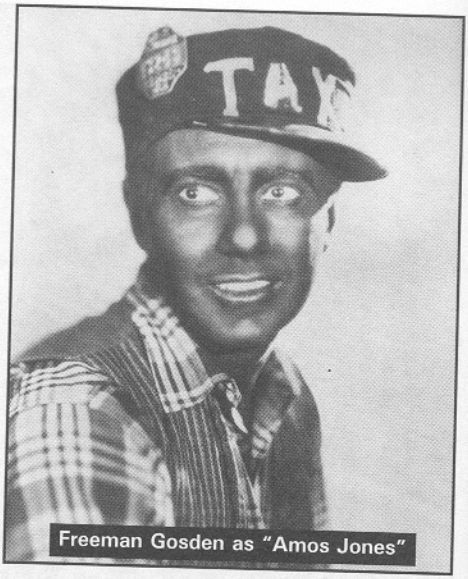
As the team worked on the script for episode number five, Gosden began riffling thru the Chicago phone book and hit upon a listing for a man named "Amos." Immediately, he knew this was the name he wanted — it summed up in four simple letters the essence of the character. And then it didn't take long to name Amos's friend. "Andy" sounded just right for a big, deep-voiced, "round and juicy" sort of character. Grabbing the first four scripts, Gosden scratched out "Jim" and "Charley" and "Tom" and "Harry." *Amos 'n' Andy* were on their way.

The new series started from the beginning. Amos Jones and Andy Brown were hired hands on a farm outside Atlanta, Georgia, working for a man named Hopkins, and the first week's worth of episodes found them looking ahead to their plans for a new life in Chicago. Amos was portrayed as a naive young man, plagued by self-doubts, and worried about being able to find work in the North while Andy was older, more worldly, and absolutely convinced that he had the answers to everything. Even when a friend warned the pair about the difficulties of finding good jobs, the cold weather, the high price of food and lodging, and all the other pitfalls that awaited, Andy remained determined to push forward. Finally, with twenty-four dollars in their pockets and four ham and cheese sandwiches to see them thru the trip, Amos and Andy said goodbye to their friends and their old life and boarded a train for Chicago.

So began an epic that would continue night after night for the next fifteen years — first over WMAQ and thirty stations by transcription, and then over a nationwide NBC network. Amos and Andy would find rough times in Chicago, until they met a young man named Sylvester, a soft-spoken but intelligent youth who worked as a garage mechanic, and was directly based, according to Gosden, on his childhood friend Garrett Brown. Sylvester would help Amos and Andy find lodgings in the big city, and would help them get started with their own business, "The Fresh Air Taxicab Company Of America, Incorpulated." Most importantly, Sylvester would introduce Amos and Andy to his employer, a prosperous businessman named Taylor — who had a bright, attractive daughter named Ruby.

The romance of Ruby Taylor and Amos Jones was the linchpin of the series during most of its first decade even though seven years went by before Ruby ever spoke a word on the air. This simple love story brought out the best in Gosden and Correll's characters — Amos, fighting back his natural shyness to stammer out his feelings in one-sided phone conversations, while Andy stood by muttering sarcastic asides, which by their very tone revealed his own loneliness. Probably no writers in all of radio were more skilled at expressing basic human emotion in their scripts. When Ruby contracted pneumonia and nearly died in May 1931, Amos was heard quietly weeping in her hospital room and was then led away by Andy. The sincerity of the writing and Gosden's and Correll's extraordinary skill as radio actors made this scene work, with one radio critic calling it "the finest bit of drama we have ever heard."

Andy, meanwhile, struggled in his romantic life — his blustering self-confidence leading him thru a string of disappointments. His entanglement with the Widow Parker in 1928 let to a breach-of-promise suit and when Amos and Andy and several of their friends moved from Chicago to Harlem in the summer of 1929, the stage was set for that scenario to repeat itself, with the advent of the formidable Madame Queen. This aggressive Harlem beautician and Andy carried on a whirlwind romance thru most of 1930 and, late that year, when Andy tried to back out of his ill-advised marriage proposal, he wound up, once more, in court. The lawsuit carried on most of that winter, in a spectacular storyline that ran from November 1930 to March of 1931, gripping the attention of the nation like no radio production before or after. By this point, Correll and Gosden had become masters of the cliffhanger ending, wringing the last drop of suspense out of every script and when they finally snapped the story to its climax by revealing that Madame Queen's first husband — presumed lost at sea — was still alive, forty million listeners sank back in their chairs with relief.


Freeman Gosden as "Amos Jones"

And so it went. Gosden and Correll weaved a rich dramatic tapestry around their characters, night after night, year after year. Hundreds of characters came and went — some important, like George "Kingfish" Stevens, who showed up in May of 1928 as the successor to *Sam 'n' Henry's* "Most Precious Diamond," or Frederick Montgomery Gwindell, a go-getting young achiever who wound up as a reporter for a Harlem newspaper, or Henry Van Porter, an insurance salesman who served as treasurer of the Mystic Knights of the Sea lodge, or Brother Crawford, a henpecked little fellow who managed the O-K Hotel. Other characters filled in the background, appearing in a few episodes here and there, only to be forgotten. All these roles were played by either Gosden or Correll, and most of them by Gosden — whose skill in multiple-voice characterizations may have been unequaled in all of radio.

Most importantly, the characters grew and changed over the years. Amos, especially, emerged as a complex, fascinating personality. Though he seemed naive and timid on the surface, he was basically a strong person, willing to stand up for what he believed in. He could only be pushed so far by Andy, by the Kingfish, or by anyone else, before he'd fight back. While he

Charles Correll as "Andy Brown"

was by nature a kind and gentle person, he was perfectly capable of taking a sock at someone who threatened him — and did so, on more than one occasion. Most of all, Amos worked hard, saved his money, and eventually matured into the happy, confident man who married Ruby Taylor in 1935. When their daughter Arbadella was born in October 1936, millions of listeners shared their joy — and Amos' tender Christmas Eve explanation of the Lord's Prayer at Arbadella's bedside, first heard in 1940, may have been the program's finest moment. Even today, listening to Gosden's sincere reading of Amos's plea for everyday human kindness emphasizes just how different "Amos 'n' Andy" was from traditional "blackface" entertainment.

There's no disputing, however, that the question of race cannot be avoided in considering *Amos 'n' Andy*. And the essential question of purpose looms even larger: What sort of impression were Gosden and Correll trying to create?

Gosden and Correll set themselves apart from the "blackface" tradition early in their radio careers by deliberately avoiding "joke" comedy, and constructing their program on a foundation of solid characterization. This was a complete break from the minstrel tradition, with its interchangeable burnt-cork caricatures. Amos, Andy and their friends were distinctive personalities who experienced a full range of emotions. This in itself was a rarity in American popular fiction, which usually relegated black characters to faceless servant roles or used them to broadly parody the conventions of the white world.

The performers also set themselves apart from their minstrel predecessors by actively seeking the endorsement of black leaders. Even in their earliest days in Chicago, the team made a point of maintaining a cordial relationship with such organizations as the Chicago Urban League and the DuSable Club, the latter the city's leading organization of black business and professional men. Their efforts on behalf of black charities were noted with approval by the Chicago Defender, a prominent weekly newspaper catering to the African-American community. The team clearly valued the support of such organizations.

One might draw the conclusion from these efforts that Gosden and Correll were doing their good works out of self-interest, conscious as they were of the need for good publicity. But the fact remains that no other "blackface" entertainers of the day ever even tried to do that much: for such personalities to even recognize the existence of the black community was unprecedented.

Even in the program's own time, black listeners were divided over *Amos 'n' Andy*. As early as 1931, at the peak of the program's popularity, journalist Robert Vann of the Pittsburgh Courier took a strong editorial stand against the program — a stand which particularly targeted the lower-class background of the series. Although Vann fell far short in his effort to gather a million petition signatures against the program — and although the campaign was ridiculed in the pages of the Chicago Defender, which was, at the time, a strong supporter of "Amos 'n' Andy" — it was clear even that early that the racial legacy of the program would be ambiguous at best.

Today, seventy years after *Amos 'n' Andy's* debut, it is impossible for many historians to view the program in its own context. Years of emotional debate have clouded the memory of what the program actually was and what its creators had intended it to be.

Most discussions revolve around the ill-fated 1950s television adaptation of the program, or the post-1943 half-hour radio sitcom: programs very, very different from Gosden and Correll's original vision for the series.

In the end, one sees in *Amos 'n' Andy* what one has been conditioned to see — and that conditioning may involve racial issues which go far beyond a simple fifteen minute radio program. But perhaps, someday, we'll have come far enough as a society to examine the series — and its legacy — with a truly open mind. ■

Freeman Gosden and Charles Correll

PHOTOFEST

## FOR MORE ON AMOS 'N' ANDY...

Melvin Patrick Ely's 1991 book "The Adventures Of Amos 'n' Andy: A Social History Of An American Phenomenon" (published by Free Press) is the definitive historical study of Gosden and Correll's accomplishments, both pro and con — offering a detailed analysis of points only touched upon here. This book is a must-read for anyone interested in racial issues in American popular culture, and offers the most even-handed treatment yet of *Amos 'n' Andy* in all its variations.

The original scripts of *Amos 'n' Andy* are available to scholars in the Gosden-Correll Collection at the Doheny Library of the University of Southern California. Microfilm copies of scripts from 1928-37 are available in the Manuscript Division of the Library Of Congress. Selected scripts from the first eight weeks of the show were published in book form by Long and Smith of New York in 1931, under the title "Here They Are: Amos 'n' Andy."

Few recordings are known to exist from the classic serial years of *Amos 'n' Andy*. Less than two dozen of the 1928-29 syndication recordings are known to survive, and even fewer episodes have surfaced from the 1929-43 network run. The loss of these episodes may be Old Time Radio's single greatest tragedy.

**--ELIZABETH MC LEOD**