

The EDDIE CANTOR Story

By Terry Baker

As radio entered the early 1930's it was facing a situation much like the nation's as a whole. Just as the country's economy had been in decline, so were both radio sales and listenership. Audiences that had bought radios to keep up with the saga of "Amos 'n' Andy" back in the late 20's were finding that there was not much else worth tuning in. Radio would have to make people want to listen.

To do this, radio was going to need an influx of big name talent to grab the public's attention. With the demise of vaudeville that's just what they got. These vaudeville stars needed work, had well polished acts and already had a built-in following from which radio could build an audience. Most of the top vaudeville stars eventually moved

to radio but the first to make the switch was Eddie Cantor.

Born on New York's East Side, Eddie (named Edward Israel Iskowitz) came into the world on January 31, 1892. Eddie's Russian-born parents both died by the time he was two and the responsibility fell upon his grandmother to raise him. Grandma Esther was able to keep a roof over their heads and food on the table by running a small employment agency, supplying cooks, dishwashers and waitresses to local restaurants.

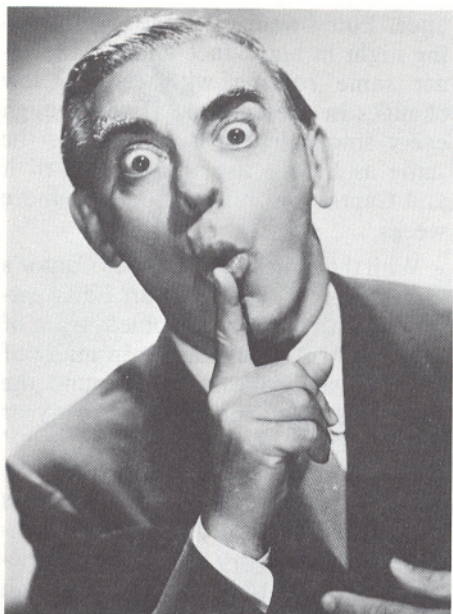
Worrying about survival made it hard for Esther to keep a tight reign on Eddie while he was growing up. By the time he was six, Eddie was already staying out till midnight singing on street corners with local gangs for pocket money. Since he was one of the few six-year olds who could carry a tune, Cantor usually did fine during these outings.

School was a different matter. The opportunity to get a quality education didn't excite Eddie and therefore he did not do well. Cantor's only enjoyment in school came from reading aloud in class. Teachers were quick to notice that he had an excellent speaking voice and Eddie would frequently be asked to recite a passage during school functions. Unfortunately for Eddie these few pleasant moments in school did not alter the fact that his grades were poor and at an early age he decided to drop out.

Although not enthusiastic about school, Cantor always looked forward to his annual trip to Surprise Lake when classes were over. Surprise Lake was a boy's camp in Cold Springs, New York. The local welfare center would sponsor a trip there each summer and it



EDDIE CANTOR - CLAU



would allow underprivileged children the opportunity to experience life in the country for a couple of weeks. Cantor loved everything about Surprise Lake and it was here where he put on his first real performance before an audience.

One evening while the group was sitting around the campfire, Eddie started to do impressions, rolling his large bulging eyes (that would later be his trademark) in an effort to amuse them. In doing this Cantor hoped that the counselors would think he had talent and ask him to stay and entertain the next group of campers that were coming. They did and Eddie became a semi-permanent feature around the camp during the next few summers. Cantor loved the camp so much that long after he became a star, he would return each year to raise money for the camp's operation.

Those weeks at camp were wonderful but eventually Eddie would have to return to the real world and once he left school, that meant finding a real job. Eddie tried a variety of occupations but he seemed more interested in making his co-workers laugh than do-

ing his job. To this end he usually didn't have those jobs very long. The great amount of spare time he did have was spent perfecting his pool game and shooting baskets in schoolyards. It was here where he would meet his wife-to-be.

Ida Tobias was an attractive, bright girl from a well respected family. She was also an excellent athlete and could better most boys in any sport. Rather than try and compete against her and be humiliated, Eddie decided to attract her attention using his singing prowess. During a local playground concert Eddie was given the chance to sing. Ida was thoroughly impressed and a romance blossomed.

Like all relationships there were problems that had to be overcome. Ida's parents warned her against falling in love with a boy from the East Side claiming that none of them were any good. The fact that Eddie was a drop-out with no steady job certainly didn't improve her parents opinion of him.

Eddie would have to find a job but the only thing he seemed to have a knack for was entertaining an audience. That raised a new problem because Ida's parents thought all show business performers were bums, ranking just above baseball players in the amount of respect accorded to them. Ida's father issued an ultimatum to Eddie saying that he would have to give up show business and settle down to a real job or lose Ida. Since this was all he could do he ignored this threat and continued to search for acting work. It would be up to Eddie to prove that he would be able to take care of Ida financially.

The year was now 1908. Cantor was 16 and under pressure to succeed for the first time in his life. He made a wise decision to start his career slowly rather than jump in head first. Eddie was content to participate in amateur contests, building up his confidence while adding to his repertoire of impressions and comedy routines.

EDDIE CANTOR STORY

A few months later Eddie moved on to take a job as a singing waiter in a Coney Island saloon. The money was good and the work was steady which enabled Eddie to accumulate the first savings of his life. With money in tow he went back to show Ida and her parents how far he had come.

What he neglected to tell them was how he made this money, preferring to tell them that he was managing a restaurant instead. Eddie knew they would find out the truth soon enough and he planned to be well established by that time so money would no longer be an issue. The important thing now was that Ida had faith in his ability to be a good provider.

After his stint as a singing waiter Cantor got a booking with the People's Vaudeville Company for four weeks at twenty dollars per. The owners were impressed with Eddie and offered him a chance to perform another four weeks provided he changed his act. Eddie had worked long and hard to perfect his performance and he certainly couldn't change it at the drop of a hat. The next move Eddie made was to have a tremendous impact on his career.

Rather than change his material Cantor decided to change his appear-

ance. Eddie went on stage the following night in black-face and did the exact same routine with only a few changes in presentation. Even though every single line of dialouge was the same as before the audience loved it and Cantor was hired to do four more weeks.

With the switch to black-face Cantor's career took off. For two years Eddie performed with the popular comedy team of Bedini and Arthur playing in many of the top vaudeville houses around the country. After that was a two-year stint with Gus Edwards "Kid Kabaret" playing along side future star Georgie Jessel. Each step up the show business ladder had increased Eddie's knowledge of the industry as well as his pocketbook. By 1914 he had saved enough so that he and Ida could be married and they tied the knot in June of that year.

For the next few years Eddie bounced from one vaudeville troop to another but in 1917 he joined the fabulous Ziegfeld Follies. There he joined such greats as Fanny Brice, Will Rogers and W.C. Fields. The Follies was big-time and so was the money he received, four hundred dollars a week.

It was during his second year with the Follies that Eddie stopped using black-face. The make-up had served him well and helped him get where he was today but he didn't want to wear it forever. Cantor was concerned how audiences would react to this change but audiences didn't seem to mind as he was just as popular with the make-up off as on.

Cantor continued with the Follies throughout the mid-1920's. Nothing could compare with the experience Eddie received while working at the Follies. He got the chance to do it all whether it was singing, dancing or comedy. Eddie proved himself talented in each of these areas.

NOSTALGIA DIGEST®

BACK ISSUES AVAILABLE

A limited number of back issues of the *Nostalgia Digest* and *Radio Guide* are available for \$2 each. For a complete list, send a stamped, self-addressed envelope to:

NOSTALGIA DIGEST ARCHIVES
Box 421
Morton Grove, IL 60053



Working with Ziegfeld also gave Cantor the opportunity to perform in front of a camera as one of their plays, "Kid Boots" was made into a motion picture with Eddie as the star. Eddie would go on to make a handful of other successful movies but his biggest success was to come in another medium.

Cantor remained with the Follies until 1928. The next few years found Eddie performing at benefits and doing an occasional film. There was not much work out there for vaudeville stars. Competition from motion pictures and radio had forced many of the old vaudeville houses to close. Eddie had never given much thought to radio before but by 1931 he decided it was time to give radio a try.

Cantor had appeared on radio once during a 1921 experimental broadcast to raise money for the Salvation Army. But Eddie's first network broadcast was not until February 5, 1931 when he appeared as a guest on Rudy Vallee's "Fleischmann Hour". Vallee's program launched many great radio careers and while some of them were virtual unknowns initially, Eddie was already an established vaudeville star when he made his appearance.

Eddie's radio debut was a successful one and within weeks he had been contacted by the makers of Chase and Sanborn coffee. They were impressed by his performance and wanted him to replace Maurice Chevalier as host of a radio program they were sponsoring. Cantor accepted their offer and his own show hit the airwaves for the first time over the NBC Red network on September 13, 1931.

Cantor was joined on the show by announcer Jimmy Wallington, orchestra leader David Rubinoff and a series of guest stars. It was a comedy-variety program that was not unlike many of the vaudeville shows that Eddie had appeared in. But it was a novelty to radio audiences who had very few shows of this type to listen to.

Eddie's songs and jokes were corny but audiences loved them. By the end of his first season his show had become the second most popular program in the country, already surpassing Rudy Vallee and trailing only Amos 'n' Andy in the ratings. With his popularity continuing to climb his show moved into the top spot the following year and remained there through 1934. No other program even came close to attracting the audience that Cantor garnered during those years.

Cantor's tremendous success was to have a great impact on the future of radio programming. Networks hoped to duplicate Eddie's success by bringing other top vaudeville stars onto radio. Jack Benny, Burns and Allen,

EDDIE CANTOR STORY

Fred Allen and Ed Wynn all began their shows the year after Cantor's debut. With talent like this, radio programs were never the same again.

Another change that Eddie was to bring to radio was audience participation. Previously, audiences were not permitted to utter a sound while in the studio. Cantor encouraged them to laugh, cheer, anything to get them involved with the program and make the audience at home feel involved too. Oftentimes Eddie would go on stage wearing a funny costume just to get the audience started.

As far as Eddie was concerned, an audience was never wrong. If a joke didn't work it was either because it wasn't funny or it wasn't presented right. Using this logic Cantor would perform his entire show before another audience six hours before air time, gauging audience reaction and making changes where needed. Eddie respected his audience and used them to improve his performance.

Cantor also used his popularity to drum up support for a host of charitable causes. Eddie knew he commanded a lot of attention and he wanted something worthwhile to come of it. He would often deliver a message at the end of his program urging listeners to support the Red Cross, to attend church, and drive safer to name just a few. During the war years Eddie encouraged his listeners to send Christmas presents to wounded GI's to let them know that Americans had not forgotten about them. The response was phenomenal.

Eddie's closest association was with the March of Dimes, the slogan of which he himself coined (no pun intended). Working with President Roosevelt, Cantor raised millions that went toward the fight against infantile paralysis. By using his talents to promote these noble causes



EDDIE CANTOR WITH SINGERS OLIVE MAJOR (left) and DINAH SHORE

Cantor endeared himself to the American public all the more.

To the surprise of many Eddie took a year off radio in 1934 to make a motion picture but he returned in a half-hour format on CBS the following year. Joining Eddie as regulars on this program were Harry Einstein and Bert Gordon. Einstein had been a semi-regular during the 1933-34 season portraying Parkyakarkus, an idiotic member of the Greek embassy. Gordon became Eddie's favorite foil as The Mad Russian.

Cantor's new show showcased the talents of a lot of young stars such as Deanna Durbin and Bobby Breen. The show was faster paced and Eddie joked more about his family life at home with Ida and his five daughters.

His new show was successful but nowhere near as popular as his previous show had been. The show was number one in 1936 but had dropped to 14th by 1938 and was cancelled the following year. The reasons for the show's demise would be difficult to

pinpoint but perhaps audiences has grown too sophisticated for Eddie's type of humor.

In the fall of 1940, radio gave Eddie another chance. Sponsored by Sal Hepatica, Cantor went on the air for NBC on Wednesday nights. The show remained basically the same except for new announcer Harry Von Zell. 1942 saw the welcome addition of Dinah Shore to the cast.

Dinah became one of the most popular singers of that time and Cantor used this to his advantage. Airing opposite Fred Allen, Eddie would find out the timing of Fred's show and when he went to a commercial Cantor would put Dinah on. Those turning the dial to avoid the commercial would find Dinah and stay there.

Cantor proved he was still popular as his show stayed in the top twenty throughout the 1940's. Eventually though, pressure from television caused all of radio's audience to decline and Eddie's program finally went off the air in 1949.

Like most other radio comedians, Eddie would make the switch over to television. Cantor had long been an outspoken advocate of television. As early as the mid 30's when television was still in its experimental stages, Eddie was quoted as saying that he felt it would someday be the greatest medium of communication.

Cantor's view of television had dimmed somewhat by the late 40's after watching the poor quality of many of the programs being broadcast. Nevertheless Eddie agreed to try out the new medium as one of the four rotating hosts of NBC's Colgate Comedy Hour. Joining Eddie as hosts were Fred Allen, Martin & Lewis, and Abbott & Costello. Each host got to showcase their particular talents along with those of several big name guest stars.

The show premiered on September 10, 1950 and was very successful,



DEANNA DURBIN AND EDDIE CANTOR

always placing in the top ten and outperforming its prime competition on Sunday night, Ed Sullivan's Toast Of The Town. Eddie was very pleased because the program was a hit and he only had to work every fourth week. Television took a lot of energy and Eddie (now pushing sixty) was not in condition to perform every week.

Even performing once a month took its toll on Cantor's health. In September of 1952 he suffered a heart attack immediately after one of his broadcasts and was out for several months. Once he recovered, Eddie returned as a semi-regular host until 1954 but he was never quite the same. The rest of his career would consist of occasional television guest roles and performing for various charities.

Eddie's health continued to decline throughout the 1950's. The last few years of his life were not happy ones. Repeated heart attacks would force him to retire and the deaths of his wife Ida and one of his daughters weakened his health all the more. Eddie Cantor died on October 10, 1964 but not before he had touched millions of Americans with his humor and kindness.