

LUM AND ABNER

The Men From Pine Ridge

BY TERRY BAKER

Radio relied on the use of dialects for a large part of its comedy material. Audiences and performers alike had grown accustomed to this type of humor which had flourished for years on the vaudeville stage. Most radio comedies either revolved around ethnic characterizations or included such characters as part of the supporting cast. "Hillbilly humor" also depended heavily on the use of such dialects and no show of this type was more popular than "Lum 'n' Abner."

"Lum 'n' Abner" was the creation of two Arkansas gentlemen, Chester Lauck and Norris Goff. Born just a few miles apart, their respective families moved to Mena, Arkansas where the boys met in

grade school and became good friends. Lauck was four years older but the age gap didn't seem to matter and they remained friends throughout their school years.

Both went away to college, then returned home to get married and find employment. Lauck was hired as manager of an auto finance company while Goff took a job in his father's grocery business. The two still visited frequently and found themselves passing the time just as they had done during their youth. They enjoyed imitating other voices they would hear, whether from the radio or those of friends and neighbors. Over the years they had become quite proficient and in a short time would have an opportunity to show off their hidden talents.

Early in 1931, a local radio station broadcast a benefit to raise money to help those Mena residents hurt by recent floods. Lauck and Goff intended to take part by performing a blackface routine they had been practicing. Upon arriving at the studio they were surprised to find numerous other performers planning to do the same type of act. With the incredible success of "Amos 'n' Andy", it was natural to find a few imitators but there were just too many of them. If Lauck and Goff wanted their talents to be noticed they would need to come up with another act, and fast.

While waiting to go on, the men decided to alter their routine and try out some other voices they had been working on. These were loosely based on folks that lived in the Arkansas hills. Within minutes the characters of two country bachelors began to emerge. Chester portrayed Lum Edwards and Norris was Abner Peabody



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LUM AND ABNER of Pine Ridge, Arkansas. They were Chester Lauck and Norris Goff, boyhood friends who met in grade school.

and they stepped in front of an audience for the first time as "Lum 'n' Abner."

Although they ad-libbed their way through most of the act, station KTHS in Hot Springs, Arkansas thought enough of their performance to offer them a job. On April 26, 1931, "Lum 'n' Abner" went on the air as a regular series appearing five nights a week.

Since neither Lauck nor Goff had any previous radio experience, they were unsure as to what style their show should take. They determined it would probably be best to pattern it after one already proven to be successful. Taking elements from "Amos 'n' Andy," "Lum 'n' Abner" became sort of a comedy/soap opera. The emphasis was on comedy but there was a hint of drama that hopefully would keep listeners tuning in the following night.

The show's setting was the fictional town of Pine Ridge, Arkansas. Most of the action took place at the "Jot 'em Down Store," the local general store which was owned by Lum and Abner. Not much ever happened in Pine Ridge so the boys had a lot of free time on their hands. Most of it was spent playing checkers and visiting with customers.

Lum was the more levelheaded of the two but seemed to have difficulties where women were concerned. Abner was already married and spoke of his wife frequently. He liked to gamble (especially on checkers) and was more irritable than Lum and a bit more vulnerable to the schemes of outsiders.

Lauck and Goff wrote their own scripts and, besides the two main characters, supplied voices for all the other townfolk as well. Lauck took on the roles of

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Grandpappy Spears, Snake Hogan and handyman Cedric Wehunt. Goff was Doc Miller and local con man Squire Skimp along with several others. The show was well written and executed and could stand up against anything the networks had to offer.

It did not take long for word of their talent to spread. Within months of their debut, The Quaker Oats Company contacted them about moving their show to the network. The company was searching for a program to serve as a summer replacement for the daytime musical variety show "Gene and Glen" which Quaker sponsored. A representative had heard "Lum 'n' Abner" and was very impressed with the show.

Chester and Norris were brought to Chicago for a formal audition and the show made its first network appearance over NBC Red stations in July of 1931.

"Lum 'n' Abner" aired six days a week and slowly built up a small but devoted following. Not surprisingly, the bulk of the show's audience lived in rural areas which could easily relate to the relaxed lifestyle that "Lum 'n' Abner" presented. The show would never garner huge ratings (it was ranked 32nd during its best year) but its audience remained loyal throughout the program's long run. In fact, the small town of Waters, Arkansas actually petitioned and got permission from Congress to formally change its name to Pine Ridge in honor of the show's setting.

In the fall of 1935, "Lum 'n' Abner" finally became part of NBC's regular evening schedule, appearing five nights a week over the Blue network. For a time Lauck and Goff continued to do everything themselves but the work load proved to be too much. Zazu Pitts, Andy Devine and Clarence Hartzell were eventually added to the cast and additional writers brought in to help with the scripts. Fortunately these changes did not affect the style or quality of the program.

The show moved a lot over the years, eventually appearing on all the major networks for a variety of sponsors ranging from Alka-Seltzer to Ford Automobiles. But wherever it went, the program remained the same. Except for two years during the late forties when the show became a half-hour situation comedy, "Lum 'n' Abner" remained a fifteen minute serial that aired between three and five times a week.

The comedy was never presented in a derogatory manner. Chester and Norris had grown up in the country and the characters they presented were done lovingly and with deep respect for those people who lived in these areas. Listeners must have sensed this because through the years the show received not one letter of complaint. Audiences continued listening in until May of 1953, making "Lum 'n' Abner" one of radio's longest running comedy-dramas.

As other radio programs moved to television, there was talk that "Lum 'n' Abner" might do the same. Chester and Norris appeared in several motion picture films during the early 40's so they did have some experience before the cameras. They likely would have done quite well on television but health problems cancelled any such plans. Goff was stricken with cancer and though he eventually recovered, the illness forced him into early retirement.

Norris settled down in Palm Springs while Lauck moved to Houston and took a job in the public relations department of a local oil company. The two remained in close contact over the years and in 1968, they began syndicating their old programs to interested stations across the country. This enabled a whole new generation to enjoy the antics of "Lum 'n' Abner."

Both men are gone now. Goff passed way in June of 1978 at the age of 72. Lauck was 78 when he died two years later. They played a very important role in radio history and brought laughter to millions of Americans for 22 years.