

The EDGAR BERGEN and CHARLIE McCARTHY Show

BY TERRY BAKER

Imagine you are a network radio executive back in the mid-1930's. You're looking for a new idea for a comedy show and one of your employees says he's got a sure-fire winner for you. He suggests that you hire a ventriloquist. This gentleman would do his act, talking to his dummies just like they were real persons. The logical first reaction (after threatening to throw this man out of your office) would be that this idea would never work. One can only appreciate a ventriloquist if you actually see him working, something you obviously could not do on radio. Well we all know that such an idea *could* work, and *did* as the Edgar Bergen & Charlie McCarthy Show.

Edgar Bergen was born in Chicago on February 16, 1903. The Bergens were a middle class family. His father came to the United States from Sweden in the 1890's and made a decent living as an architect and dairyman. While Edgar was still young, his father became very ill and decided to retire. The family moved to a small dairy farm in Decatur where Mr. Bergen hoped he could get well. It was here that Edgar got his first taste of show business.

In order to help the family's financial situation, Edgar got himself a job at a local movie theater when he was only 11. He literally started out at the bottom, stoking the basement furnace. Being an ambitious lad, Edgar quickly earned himself a promotion upstairs where he not only ran the film projector, but operated the theater's player piano as well.

Being a part of the entertainment industry greatly increased Bergen's interest in it. He tried his best to attend the various vaudeville shows that came through town and was amazed by the talents these

performers displayed. Edgar was especially fascinated by ventriloquists and how they could literally throw their voices. So much so that he began practicing the art himself. He started out by imitating animals and other people in the neighborhood. He even went so far as to spend a quarter of his hard earned money on a book about magic and ventriloquism. Few wiser investments have ever been made.

The book gave Bergen the chance to perfect his technique and get the most out of the talent he had been blessed with. The more he practiced the better he got. Bergen would practice whenever he got the opportunity and found great pleasure in playing jokes on both friends and family alike. His favorite prank was to knock on the bottom of a chair, then throw his voice to make people believe that someone was at the door.

Since every ventriloquist needs a dummy, Edgar decided to make one himself. Using papier-mache and a Halloween mask with a movable mouth, Bergen fashioned a small boy that he named Rastus. He even put together his own routine. Edgar knew his act wasn't very good but his mother encouraged his efforts and even invited him to perform at some of her church functions.

His father's health grew worse through the years and he died when Edgar was only fourteen. Soon after, Mrs. Bergen moved the family back to Chicago. Edgar was now in high school and busy with his studies but he did what he could to help out the family financially. Besides taking various odd jobs, Bergen continued to work on his act and got an occasional job performing at local lodge halls.



EDGAR BERGEN & CHARLIE McCARTHY

Bergen attended Lane Tech for two years, then transferred to Lakeview High School. It was at Lakeview, during his senior year, that Edgar decided to create a new dummy for his act. The result was Charlie McCarthy.

Edgar had been tired of his hand-made dummy for some time and was determined that his next one would be professional quality no matter what the cost. But what should it look like? Bergen drew a few sketches but nothing really grabbed his

attention until he noticed a young Irish newsboy named Charlie selling papers around his high school. There was something about this boy's smiling face that Edgar loved and he began making sketches of Charlie in his history book.

Bergen then took his finished drawings to a local carpenter by the name of Theodore Mack. After studying the sketches, Mack quoted Edgar a price of \$35 to carve his figure out of pine. Trouble was, Bergen only had \$17 and it had taken him six months to save that. It took some quick calculation, but Edgar determined that if he stopped going to the movies and trimmed his other expenses he could pay Mack off in about twelve weeks. Mack agreed to the arrangement and started the work.

Edgar was so excited about the prospect of his new partner that he made plans to take a summer job after graduation performing on the Chautauqua Circuit. Chautauqua was a roving vaudeville show that featured young talent. The shows usually took place in tents and were sponsored by churches or local businesses in the small towns in which they played. Bergen thought this would be a wonderful learning experience and would also bring him some much needed cash as he planned to attend Northwestern University in the fall.

He had to graduate first, though, and the prospects were not looking too bright. Bergen had become so preoccupied with his future plans that his grades started to slip. In February, Edgar's history teacher, Miss Angel, informed him that he was flunking her class and unless his grades improved he would not be receiving his diploma.

Even the threat of failure did not help Bergen focus on his studies. He was far more interested in how Mr. Mack was progressing on his project. It was a long three months but the wait proved worthwhile. Mack had done a magnificent job capturing the facial expression that Bergen had seen in that newsboy. Edgar

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chose to call his new dummy Charlie McCarthy. Charlie for the boy who inspired it and McCarthy as a tribute to the man that made it.

Charlie made his stage debut a few weeks later at Edgar's spring recital program. Since Bergen knew he was going to flunk anyway, he decided to go out with a bang. He created a routine where Charlie portrayed a fellow student who poked good-natured fun at Miss Angel and the school principal, "Square Deal" Brown. Afterwards Edgar was surprised to learn that Miss Angel enjoyed his performance. She had no idea how talented Bergen was and told him that the world needed laughter a lot more than another history teacher. She offered to tutor him in an effort to bring up his history grade and with her help, Bergen graduated on schedule.

After a pleasant summer with Chautauqua, Edgar started college in the fall of 1922. Charlie went right along with him and it was only through the money raised by his ventriloquist/magic act that Bergen was able to stay in school. He performed on weekends at many of the smaller vaudeville houses throughout the Chicago area, usually earning around five dollars a day. He quickly dropped the magic portion of his act after one theater manager told him that he could only continue working there if he did so. This was fine with Edgar as it meant more stage time for Charlie.

Bergen's initial desire for attending college was to go into medicine but his stage success soon changed those plans. Edgar switched his major to speech and earned his degree by attending class in the summer and performing with vaudeville troupes in the winter. For a decade Bergen toured the old vaudeville circuits. These shows took him across the United States, down through South American and over to Europe. All the while Edgar continued to improve his routine and soon he and Charlie were one of the most popular

ventriloquism acts on the circuit.

Like all performers of the day, Bergen ran into hard times during the early 1930's. The depression had its grips around America and the increasing popularity of radio and talking pictures caused vaudeville audiences to decline dramatically. Jobs became harder to come by and while Bergen never had trouble finding work before, now he was going three, sometimes four weeks between engagements. As money grew tighter, Edgar realized that if he planned to stay in show business some changes would have to be made.

In early 1935, Edgar made the decision to try his hand at something new — nightclubs. He got a job at Helen Morgan's club in New York where Sophie Tucker was starring. To appeal to the more sophisticated audience in attendance, Bergen thought about using another dummy. He had contacted *Esquire* Magazine and inquired about using their symbol Esky for a dummy. After giving initial approval, the publishers changed their mind, so Edgar simply spruced up Charlie. He donned Charlie in a tuxedo and a monocle and even gave him a slight British accent.

The act was a big success and Bergen took it to all the top clubs throughout the country. Sometimes Bergen found himself appearing in two places on the same night. In Chicago, for example, Edgar would do three shows at the Chez Paree and then move over to the Chicago Theater (where he headlined for the first time) and do two more. He was now mingling with the cream of high society and the contacts Bergen made at these clubs would lead to his next big career break.

In the fall of 1936, Edgar was appearing at the Rainbow Room in Manhattan when he was asked to entertain at a private party for Noel Coward. He accepted the offer and the publicity generated by this performance got the attention of the J. Walter Thompson advertising agency. This agency handled the booking of talent for



W.C. FIELDS, DOROTHY LAMOUR, CHARLIE McCARTHY AND EDGAR BERGEN on The Chase and Sanborn Show.

the Rudy Vallee program and they invited Edgar and Charlie to be the guests on the show. Bergen knew that many stars had gotten their start on Vallee's show and he quickly accepted the invitation.

Bergen had tried to get into radio several months earlier, but had been turned down. While playing the *Chez Paree* in Chicago, Edgar auditioned for station WMAQ and was told by station manager Clarence Menzer that his act just wouldn't work on radio. Menzer (who would later become vice-president of NBC) felt that the radio audience would be confused by a ventriloquist and wouldn't believe that Bergen was doing both voices. Edgar argued that it really wouldn't be ventriloquism on radio. He would simply be

providing the voice of another character in the same manner as Freeman Gosden and Charles Correll did with "Amos 'n' Andy." Bergen's words fell on deaf ears though as he failed to get the job.

Edgar and Charlie made their radio debut on December 17, 1936 and the audience loved them. They became so popular that they were invited back for 13 consecutive weeks. This created a problem as Edgar had to write a new routine for each show. In vaudeville Bergen would take a month or more to write a new act. He then had the luxury of trying it out on a new audience every night, refining it as he went. In radio you were playing to an audience of 30 to 40 million people and to keep them listening you had to have new

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material every week. Fortunately Edgar was a talented writer and was able to come with new ideas for every performance.

Within months of their last appearance with Rudy Vallee, Edgar and Charlie had their own show. Standard Brands (which also owned Vallee's program) hired them to star in their own comedy-variety show and *The Chase & Sanborn Hour* first aired over the NBC Red network on May 9, 1937. Their sponsor spared no expense in ensuring the success of the show. Not only were they given an outstanding time slot (Sunday evenings at seven) but they were surrounded by one of the finest and most expensive supporting casts on radio.

Don Ameche (who had gotten his start on the *First Nighter* program) was brought on to be the master of ceremonies. English orchestra leader Ray Noble directed the music and was also a fine comedian. Opera star Nelson Eddy provided the vocals and Dorothy Lamour helped with the music and comedy sketches. But the biggest star among the regulars and one of the main reasons for the show's early success was legendary comic W.C. Fields.

Fields had little previous radio experience and had turned down other offers to star in his own program. However, a desire to lessen his movie workload because of health concerns and a most generous salary offer from the show's sponsor (\$6,500 a week) convinced Fields to come aboard. He and Bergen respected each other's abilities and worked beautifully together. His comedic timing and brilliant wit were assets to the show and he became the perfect foil for Charlie.

The exchanges between the two became the highlight of each show. Charlie would constantly ridicule Fields about his penchant for alcohol and W. C. responded with threats to turn Charlie into kindling. It was up to Bergen to keep them apart. Fields was a regular for only five months but had a great hand in the initial success of the program. He continued to make

occasional guest appearances for the next six years.

The truly amazing thing about the show was the fact that listeners began thinking of Charlie as a real person, albeit a wooden one. This was a tribute to Edgar who created and executed Charlie's character to a point where it was believable. Bergen portrayed Charlie as a young boy who hated school and got into mischief just like any other child. Bergen served as a father figure to Charlie and it was his job to teach Charlie the proper way to behave.

While Bergen may have had top billing, there was no question that Charlie was the star of the show. Charlie was the reason people tuned in and that was just fine with Edgar. Bergen was a quiet individual offstage and through Charlie he was able to express himself in a manner he otherwise would not. Charlie was cocky, boastful and likely to say just about anything. Audiences never knew what to expect from him. He'd be flirting with a glamorous Hollywood starlet one minute and getting into trouble with his school principal the next.

Within weeks of its debut, the show was the top-ranked program in the nation, a spot it would hold for the next three years. But, the show was nearly cancelled in the middle of the first season because of the infamous "Adam and Eve sketch." Edgar and Charlie were not involved in the incident but their careers were threatened just the same.

Don Ameche and guest star Mae West performed a comedy skit in which they played Adam and Eve in the Garden of Eden. On paper the sketch seemed harmless and was passed by the NBC censors, but that was before Mae and her sultry voice got involved. Don realized something wasn't right during rehearsals. Mae was holding back, but the sketch still seemed a lot more risqué than it should have been. Don was afraid what would happen when she really let go during the performance and his fears proved justified.



MORTIMER SNERD

Today this routine would not even raise an eyebrow, but some 54 years ago it sent a panic through the radio industry. NBC affiliates were inundated with calls from irate listeners wondering how they could let something this obscene on the air. The FCC launched a full investigation of the matter and demanded a transcript of the show, a copy of the show and a list of all network stations that carried the broadcast. In the U.S. House, Representatives demanded that action be taken against NBC for allowing "this foul and sensuous radio program" into American homes. Both NBC and Chase & Sanborn issued formal apologies and Mae West was banned from all future network radio appearances for a period of 15 years. NBC would not even allow her name to be mentioned on the air. The end result was that the show's ratings went up two points!

Charlie was the hottest thing on radio and made Bergen a very wealthy man. Besides his radio salary (around \$10,000 a week), Edgar earned close to \$100,000 a year in royalties from the sale of Charlie McCarthy merchandise. They also

appeared in nine feature films and some dozen Vitaphone shorts through the years which added to their popularity and to Bergen's pocketbook as well.

In turn, Edgar made sure that Charlie was well taken care of. Charlie's limbs were changed frequently to protect against wear and tear and he traveled in a specially designed trunk. His wardrobe rivaled that of many a Hollywood star. Edgar even mentioned Charlie in his will. Bergen bequeathed ten thousand dollars to the Actor's Fund of America to establish a Charlie McCarthy Fund. This money was to be used to provide ventriloquist entertainment for underprivileged and handicapped children.

There was quite a panic when Charlie was "kidnapped" in March of 1939. A reporter friend decided to play a joke on Bergen and swiped Charlie from his Waldorf-Astoria hotel room. New York police and FBI agents were called in but the reporter returned Charlie the next day and Edgar chose not to press charges.

The radio show was rolling along in 1939 when Edgar added another character to his repertoire. He felt the show needed a contrast to Charlie's know-it-all attitude. He wanted to create a character that was dumb but lovable and of course needed a dummy to reflect such a personality. Bergen did a detailed study on character analysis as related to facial expressions and Mortimer Snerd was a combination of weak features. Bergen would say later that Mortimer was "scientifically stupid."

After the first few seasons it became obvious that the rapport between Bergen and his dummies was the best part of the program. In order to capitalize on this fact the sponsor changed the format of the show. In 1940 it was shortened to 30 minutes. Don Ameche, Nelson Eddy, and Dorothy Lamour were let go (although Don would return later) and replaced by a weekly guest star. Abbott & Costello came aboard as regulars for a season, but the emphasis of the show really shifted to Edgar, Charlie and Mortimer.

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There's an old show business adage that you're only as good as your material and this show certainly bore that out. A ventriloquist on radio was certainly a novelty at first but if the show wasn't funny, audiences would have stopped listening. If a radio program hoped to survive it had to be well written and Bergen worked hard to maintain the quality of the show. It took Edgar and his writers the entire week to prepare for each broadcast, but their commitment to excellence showed in the finished product that went out over the air.

The show remained one of the top-rated programs on radio throughout the 1940's, falling out of the top five only once through the 1948 season. The show changed very little during these years. A few reoccurring characters were introduced such as Ersel Twing (played by Pat Patrick) and Professor Edwin Carp (played by Richard Haydn). Edgar also created two new dummies, man-hungry Effie Klinker in 1944 (named after program writer Zeno Klinker) and Podine Puffington several years later. Each was used sparingly though and never reached the popularity of Charlie or Mortimer.

Bergen ended his eleven year relationship with NBC in 1948 along with other network stars like Jack Benny and

Red Skelton. They all signed with CBS because of substantial capital gains tax breaks offered by that network. Edgar took a year off from radio, but returned to the air for Coca-Cola in 1949 (in the same Sunday evening time slot) and regained nearly all of his previous audience. Even as audiences were switching to television, Bergen remained loyal to radio and was one of the last comedy-variety shows on the air when it was cancelled in 1956.

Edgar had no trouble keeping himself busy after his radio career ended. In January of 1956 he started a 14-month run as emcee of the television game show "Do You Trust Your Wife?" on which Charlie and the others made frequent visits. He and his dummies also made countless guest appearances on top TV variety shows. Bergen even did some stage work again, performing his act in Las Vegas and other top theaters around the country.

For those of us who didn't think he could, Edgar even proved he could perform without his dummies. He made several films and also portrayed Grandpa Walton in the made-for-TV movie "The Homecoming" which was the pilot for "The Waltons" television series. Producers asked him to continue the role when the series started in 1972 but Bergen declined, citing his age and his desire to spend more time with his wife and children.

Early in September of 1978, Edgar officially announced his retirement. He died of a heart attack a few weeks later.

Memories of Edgar Bergen and his magnificent talent are still with us today. We continue to listen to his classic radio programs and, thanks to a generous donation from Mrs. Frances Bergen and the Bergen Foundation, the figures of Charlie McCarthy, Mortimer Snerd and Effie Klinker are on permanent display at the Museum of Broadcast Communications in Chicago.

And this fall, the U.S. Postal Service issued a commemorative 29-cent postage stamp honoring Bergen & McCarthy.

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