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I Remember Amos 'n' Andy

. . . and how thrilled I was to meet them.

by Ward W. Konkle

It was a summer afternoon in 1935 and I was just finishing my radio show at WFBG, the NBC outlet in Altoona, Pennsylvania, when I noticed two men pacing back and forth outside the studio window. When my sign-off theme started playing, I opened the studio door and bumped into one of the pacing men. Embarrassed, I mumbled my apologies. At that moment the station manager appeared and introduced me to Freeman Gosden and Charles Correll.

Although I didn't recognize the faces, the names sounded strangely familiar. Then suddenly I remembered.

"You're Amos 'n' Andy," I exclaimed, pointing my finger at them.

Both men grinned.

"Sho nuff," Andy said, chuckling.

As we shook hands, the manager explained that they were on their way to Pittsburgh for a personal appearance and had stopped off at his request for a brief radio interview.

Like millions of other Americans, I had been an Amos 'n' Andy fan ever since their

Charles Correll (left) as Andy and Freeman Gosden as Amos during their early days on Chicago's radio station WGN.

debut on the NBC Blue network in 1929. So great was their popularity that most movie theatres had to stop showing their films at 7 PM and channel the Amos 'n' Andy broadcast through their speaker systems. On summer evenings in any city you could walk down any residential street at 7 PM and hear every word of the Amos 'n' Andy broadcast coming from open windows. At the peak of their popularity, their audience was estimated at more than 80 million.

Now I stood face to face with these two great comedians. As we talked, I noticed that their voices had little resemblance to the characters they portrayed on the air.

"Tell me," I asked, "how do you change your voices to sound like Amos 'n' Andy?"

Freeman Gosden spoke first. "Well, I just pitch my voice higher, like this, switch to a dialect and . . . 'fore you know it, I'se Amos Jones."

"I do just the opposite," Charles Correll said. "My natural voice is higher than Andy's, so I lower the pitch, add the dialect and . . . you is now talking' to Andrew H. Brown."

The transformation was pure magic. I could close my eyes and picture vividly in my mind the real-life characters they portrayed.

Our interview moved to the studio for the benefit of station listeners. The manager was interested in how their career started. Gosden admitted their climb to stardom hadn't been easy. After seven years with traveling minstrel shows as producers and as a singing duo, they got their first radio job in Chicago—still as a harmony team—doing six shows a week for one free meal a day.

In 1925 they got their first real paying job at Chicago's prestigious WGN, owned by the *Chicago Tribune.* It was here they got the idea for doing a blackface comedy show. They called it "Sam 'n' Henry," using ideas they had gleaned from their minstrel days, from comic strips, and from their own backgrounds.

Sam 'n' Henry became such a huge success in Chicago that they proposed recording the show and syndicating it to radio stations in other cities. When the *Tribune* opposed the idea, they moved to WMAQ and carried out their plan to gain a wider audience. But since the *Tribune* owned the rights to Sam 'n' Henry, they had to change the show title.

"We kinda liked the names, Amos 'n' Andy," Gosden explained. "They seemed to fit the characters, and we thought people could remember them easily."

Because of their popularity, Gosden and Correll were offered a contract by Pepsodent to broadcast over the NBC network. The show premiered on August 19, 1929, with Bill Hay as their announcer. Their opening theme, "The Perfect Song," played on a pipe organ, set the stage for a glimpse into the lives of two of the most lovable characters ever to appear on radio.

Asked if they had any theory as to why their show was so popular, Correll replied, "Well, Bill Hay says we present problems in a way that both amuses and helps listeners."

Gosden chuckled. "Yeah, remember what we had Amos say once after the Depression hit?" He lapsed into his character role:

"Times like dese does a lot of good 'cause when dis is over, which is bound to be, an' good times come back again, peoples like us dat is livin' today is goin' learn a lesson an' dey goin' know what a rainy day means."

From the lowliest poor to the very rich, the entire nation was addicted to the Amos 'n' Andy program for nearly a quarter century. Both NBC and the Pepsodent Company reaped huge benefits from the show. But more important, the Amos 'n' Andy show contributed more lasting social values to the American scene than any other endeavor radio has ever offered. ♦

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