

RETURN WITH US NOW...

RADIO HISTORICAL
ASSOCIATION OF
COLORADO

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July, 2004

Three Famous Notes of Broadcasting History - The NBC Chimes

by Bill Harris

*"When you hear the chime, it's NBC time"
"By Choice The Nation's Voice"*

"This is NBC, the National Broadcasting Company, Bong Bong Bong."

Almost anyone who ever listened to radio has at some time or other, heard the famous three note chime that has been the long time trademark of NBC. These chimes were used on the hour and half-hour to announce station breaks on the network.

I became interested in the history of the chimes after discovering a book at the library titled *The Fourth Chime* by NBC, printed in 1944. I had never heard of a "fourth" chime and my curiosity was aroused. I checked out the book to find out more about this extra chime. However the book told very little about the fourth chime, but dealt mainly with the role NBC played in the reporting of special world-wide news events, primarily during World War II.

I began to seek more information about this fourth chime. Was it a different note from the other

three or maybe a repeat of one of the others? Where could I get a recording of this fourth chime?

A letter to the editor of *Antique Radio Classified* brought some results. My request for more information was published in the December 1994 issue of *ARC Radio Miscellanea* column, and shortly I received a letter with a copy of an article by Rod Phillips about the history of the chimes. I also made inquiries on the *Old Time Radio Digest* on the Internet. I was particularly looking for a recording of the fourth chime. The response was great to say the least, and I began to be able to put the pieces of the

puzzle together. A recent trip to the Library of Congress in Washington DC also turned up more interesting information on the history of these three little notes.

The Birth Of The Chimes

As I have continued to gather information since starting this project, I have found what appear to be several versions of how the chimes came to be. Perhaps only those early radio broadcasters who were involved with the beginning of the chimes know exactly how it happened, but

hopefully the information I have collected will shed some light.

NBC - New York...The National Broadcasting
(Continued on Page 3)



The original Portland Maine WCSH J.C. Deagan chimes
(Photo by Paul Hopkins)

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AND THE CD LIBRARY HAS A NEW LIBRARIAN**

Convention Schedules

28th Old-time Country Music Contest and Festival, Aug 30 - Sep 5, 2004 at Harrison County Fairgrounds in Missouri Valley, Iowa. For information contact Bob Everhart at Box 492, Walnut, IA 51577 (712) 762-4363, bobeverhart@yahoo.com

29th Friends of Old-time Radio Convention, Oct 21 - 24, 2004 at the Holiday Inn, Newark, NJ. For information contact Jay Hickerson, Box 4321, Hamden, CT 06514 (203) 248-2887, JayHick@aol.com, or check our web site: <http://www.fotr.net>

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Company was incorporated on September 9, 1926 under the laws of Delaware. It was a corporation owned jointly by RCA (50%), GE (30%), and Westinghouse (20%). The NBC network began broadcasting on November 15 of the same year from studios WEAF in New York City. There was a combined group of nineteen scattered affiliated stations, using more than 3500 circuit miles of telephone wires. At the end of a program the NBC announcer would read the call letters of all the NBC stations carrying the program. As the network added more stations this became impractical and would cause some confusion among the affiliates as to the conclusion of network programming and when the station break should occur on the hour and half-hour. Some sort of coordinating signal was needed to signal the affiliates for these breaks and allow each affiliate to identify. Three men at NBC were given the task of finding a solution to the problem and coming up with such a coordinating signal. These men were; Oscar Hanson, from NBC engineering, Earnest LaPrada, an NBC orchestra leader, and Phillips Carlin, an NBC announcer.

A set of hand dinner chimes was purchased from the Lesch Silver Co. of Manhattan for \$48.50, and during the years 1927 and 1928 these men experimented with a seven note sequence of chimes, G-C-G-E-G-C-E. This proved too complicated for the announcers to consistently strike in the correct order, so the sequence was reduced to four notes G-G-G-E. Sometime later two Gs were dropped and a C added to become the three notes G-E-C. These three notes were first broadcast on November 29, 1929, the notes were struck at 59 minutes 30 seconds, and 29 minutes 30 seconds past the hour.

WSB - Atlanta...I received information from a person who worked for WSB-TV in Atlanta, Georgia for 24 years, that the chimes had their origin at Atlanta radio station WSB. Supporting this, Paul Terry phoned in the following after the St. Petersburg Times piece that appeared in the February 9, 1995 *Action* column.

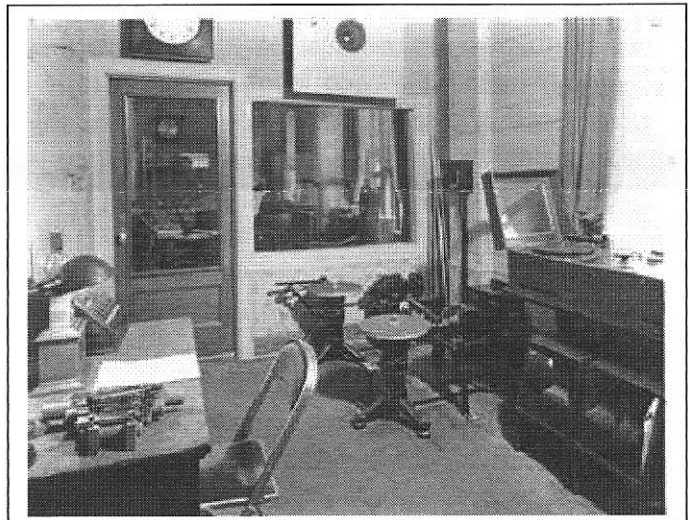
"I read in your Jan. 17 Action column that NBC officials said the chimes used for network identification are the musical notes G, E, and C and originally stood for General Electric Corporation which was part owner of NBC."

"I think if you research this a little further you will find that the chimes really

originated in Atlanta, GA., at radio station WSB."

"In the late 1920's, WSB station manager Lambdin Kay began using a miniature xylophone to hit those same three notes to signal station breaks. Later, when WSB joined the NBC network, WSB cut in one day during a Georgia Tech football game with the chimes. NBC liked it so well that it got permission to use the chimes for its own identification."

Terry, 87, started working for American Telephone at age 12 and retired 52 years later. When not working he would hang around station WSB, and that is how he came to know about the chimes. Mr. Terry passed away two days after phoning in his story to the St. Petersburg Times. Elmo Ellis, who was hired by WSB in 1940 and retired as general manager of the station some years ago, confirmed Terry's story.



WSB Studios in Atlanta - chimes on table to left

WSB claims to be the first radio station to use a musical identification at the end of its programs. The xylophone that Lambdin Kay used was given to him by a young lady, Nell Pendly, the night she and her twin sister Kate, appeared on the station.

Nell suggested to Kay that he try the chimes as a musical identification. The notes used by WSB were the first three notes of the World War I song *Over There*, which are the notes E-G-C. This becomes important when discussing the fourth chime later in this article. NBC rearranged the notes to G-E-C. Station WSB went on the air in 1922 and became an affiliate of NBC on January 9, 1927.

WGY - Schenectady...The following information was received via e-mail from a former Program

Manager at WGY which was the flagship station of the General Electric Company at Schenectady, New York. WGY went on the air February 22, 1922 with 1,500 watts of power. During this Program Manager's tenure, the station celebrated its 50th anniversary. In doing research in preparation for a documentary on the station's history, the researchers found what they believe pointed to the chimes origination at WGY. The research indicated that about a year after the station went on the air, the notes G-E-C were used as an identification and stood for the General Electric Company...the notes were sounded on a piano.

KFI - Los Angeles.... This station, which went on the air in April of 1922, also lays claim to be where the chimes originated. Broadcaster-historian Frank Bresee, related the following to me. In 1972 he wrote and produced the 50th Anniversary program for KFI. One of the NBC stars appearing on the program was long-time announcer Ken Carpenter. He began his career at KFI and related to Mr. Bresee that upon joining KFI in 1930 he was told that the chimes originated at the station when it opened in 1922. They wanted a way to identify the closing of programs so they used the familiar notes and this was later picked up by NBC.

Where Did The Chimes Originate?

So we have four stories to choose from, all claiming to be the originators of these famous three little notes of broadcasting history. To whom do we give the credit? Without any concrete documentation or first hand knowledge of someone who was actually there at NBC when the decision was made to use those notes, I don't think we can really say just to whom the credit goes. All of the stories are plausible and no doubt true to the extent that WSB, WGY, and KFI were using these tones or a combination thereof for an audible identification before the birth of NBC. As far as the decision to use them at NBC and from what source they came, as I stated earlier in this article, only those who were directly involved really know the true story. Sadly they are no longer with us to confirm what we wish to know. Perhaps buried somewhere in some long forgotten NBC archive lies the answer, but from wherever they came, those three little notes became one of the most recognized sound trademarks in broadcasting history.

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Original NBC Chimes

I wondered if any of the original hand chimes used by any of the affiliate network stations still existed. A search on the Internet produced an article about television station WCSH in Portland Maine being sold by the family who were the original owners of the station from the time it was one of the original NBC radio affiliates. The grandson of the stations founder and current owner stated that the station still had the original hand chimes used at the radio station to sound the tones on the NBC network, and these chimes were currently on display in the lobby of the station. The chimes used at WCSH and other affiliates were dinner chimes manufactured by the J. C. Deagan Company of Chicago, a manufacturer of musical percussion instruments. On page 1 of this article is a picture of the original WCSH Deagan chimes. As shown in the photo, the four bars are mounted on a wood sound box, the bars being held above the box by cords pulled taut through metal eyelets. A small felt mallet was used to strike the bars. These are off-the-shelf dinner chimes that could be found in use at a number of places. Railroad porters used them on passenger trains to announce when meals were being served in the dining car. They were used for similar purposes at hotels, resorts, on cruise ships and even in private homes. The Deagan company was eventually sold to the Yamaha Music Company.

Development Of The Electronic Rangertone Chimes

In 1932, two NBC engineers, Robert M. Morris, and O. B. Hanson visited a Captain Richard H. Ranger at his home in Newark, New Jersey. The purpose of this visit was to see an electronic organ Captain Ranger had invented. Morris describes the organ as "quite complex, and had many features of the pipe organ but the equipment consisting of countless tubes, relays, oscillators, amplifiers, filters, modulators, etc. which occupied all of a two car garage."

After their inspection of the electronic organ was complete, Captain Ranger accompanied Morris and Hanson to the Robert Treat Hotel for some refreshments. It was here that the subject of a possible electronic version of the NBC Chimes arose. It was suggested that Captain Ranger design such a unit and present it as a proposal to NBC.

Approximately a month and a half later Captain Ranger had a working model. The machine was an

electro-mechanical device constructed much like a music box. A set of finely tuned metal reeds was plucked by the fingers on a revolving drum. The metal reeds formed a capacitor of an oscillator circuit, this varying signal was amplified and sent out over the network.



Earnest La Prada

Initial tests of the Rangertone Chimes indicated a tone quite different from the soft-toned hand-struck Deagan chimes. This problem was referred to the music department and Earnest La Prada was assigned to work with Roland Lynn of the NBC Laboratory to see if a better tone quality could be produced, and after many days of effort, the desired tone was achieved. After necessary circuit changes were made in the studio control system the new electronic chimes were put on the air in New York on September 17, 1932, and now the famous chimes could be sounded with the simple push of a button. Additional units were ordered for other major NBC studios. An announcement of the introduction of the electric chimes

(<http://www.gbronline.com/radioguy/chmintro.htm>) appeared in the October 1, 1932 issue of *Radio World*. The Rangertone chimes were used up until sometime around 1939, at which time they were replaced by all electronic chimes developed by the NBC Laboratory.

Pre-set Chimes

The timing of the beginning and ending of network shows was critical. It would be up to the announcer or control room engineer to manually push the button to sound the chimes at the end of a program. If the button was not pressed hard enough the Rangertone chimes machine would not activate and the button would have to be pressed again. There was about a one-second delay between the time the button was pressed and the chimes went out over the network. Some programs tended to either

run over a bit or run short and the chimes were not always rung at the proper time. This inconsistent ringing of the chimes caused problems with network switching. NBC engineers monitored some 90 ringings of the chimes on both the Red and Blue networks on Friday, February 4, 1938 and noted that at times the chimes were rung up to 16 seconds late. The average for the day was 4.08 seconds late. To solve this problem it was suggested in an Interdepartmental Correspondence, dated February 17, 1938 that the chimes should be pre-set to automatically ring at 20 seconds before the close of the hour and half-hour. There seemed to be some concern that the production directors may object to this as it meant they would have to better control the ending of programs. Sidney Strotz off NBC Chicago commented in a memo, "Because of our switching situation here in Chicago and the fact that we are at the present switching some 12 to 14 different legs of the network which necessitates synchronization either with the Blue or the Red, it is advisable that accuracy be maintained at the various divisional points and origination points of programs." The final consensus seemed to be that the production managers, knowing that a program would be cutoff and the chimes would ring at a specific time, would learn to time the endings of programs accordingly.

(To Be Continued)

Author Bill Harris describes himself as follows:

"I am am old enough to remember listening to OTR before we had television. I remember lying on the floor with my brother and sister in front of the Airline console radio, staring at the green "magic eye" and listening to our favorite programs. In addition to my interest in OTR and early broadcasting I also collect and restore vintage radios and other radio related memorabilia from those days.

Radios in my collection date from 1920 to a few of the early transistor sets of the early 1950s. I enjoy listening to OTR and big band music broadcast to my sets using a low powered AM transmitter.

My wife and I are both retired from IBM and after living all our lives in Texas, we now live in Colorado Springs, CO where our children and grandchildren are located."

Bill can be reached at nbcblue@hotmail.com

Private Eyelashes: Radio's Lady Detectives
by Jack French

A book review by Stewart Wright

One of the most popular genres of Old-Time Radio was the private investigator. While much has been written about male radio private investigators, comparatively little has appeared in print about their female counterparts. Well-respected Old-Time Radio writer and researcher Jack French fills this major void in OTR literature with his well-researched and well-written book, "Private Eyelashes." In his book, Jack tells the story of the lady detectives and crime-fighters of the American Golden Age of Radio.

Jack has given his topic comprehensive and insightful coverage and as a retired F.B.I. agent, he is well qualified to write about investigative matters. In his extensive research, Jack has uncovered much previously undocumented information about many of these fictional feminine crime fighters and their series.

While Old-Time Radio fans are probably familiar with Della Street of *Perry Mason*, Pam North of *Mr. and Mrs. North*, and Candy Matson of *Candy Matson YU 2-8209*; readers of "Private Eyelashes" will also learn about less well-known characters such Sara Berner of *Sara's Private Capers*, Irene Delroy of *Transcontinental Murder Mystery*, Barbara Sutton of *The Black Hood* and many others. Forty-four female private eyes, policewomen, amateur and comedic investigators, investigative journalists and lawyers, investigative assistants, wife and husband investigative teams, and female and male crime fighting partners are discussed in his book. Every female radio character known to have rendered significant assistance in mystery solving or crime fighting is covered in the pages of "Private Eyelashes."

The author not only gives extensive series background, plot line, cast and crew information, he also provides lively discussions of the female investigative characters and the other major characters in each series. Historical background is provided on characters that got their starts or later appeared in print, motion pictures, and television. Additionally, Jack presents biographical sketches of the actors who played them. Numerous script dialog

samples are offered that help make these fictional characters come alive. He has even determined the number of episodes in circulation for each series.

Jack French has provided Old-Time Radio fans with an incredibly entertaining and informative volume that definitively covers a previously little known portion of radio; that of the female radio detective. Thank you, Jack for adding such a fine book to the body of Old-Time Radio literature. "Private Eyelashes" is a book that should be in the library of every serious OTR fan.

Private Eyelashes by Jack French

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238 pp. photographs, bibliography, chapter sources index. \$18.85 (plus \$2.00 shipping)

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**New in the Tape
and CD Libraries**

by Dick and Malettha King

This month we are entering CDs #618 through 664 - all "Escape" shows. These have upgraded sound and are in chronological order ranging up to the beginning of 1949.

We often wonder if our members realize how many hours of work Bill McCracken invests in organizing, listening, selecting for best sound, recording and documenting these CDs. This month's entries contain 47 hours of shows and Bill has spent at least double that time to make these offerings available. We need more members like Bill that are willing to give some of their time to the club.

It happens that another of our good workers is moving out of state and we will be needing a new librarian for the first five hundred sets of cassettes - Library #1. Unfortunately, we are forced to temporarily close Library #1 until we find a new librarian.

We would love to hear from anyone who would be interested in the librarian position. Please call Larry or Malettha (numbers on page 2) for more info.

In the mean time, we are proud to welcome **Tom Woessner** as our new CD librarian. Please see the new CD ordering form, with the name/address change, included in this newsletter.