

Major Sponsor, Heavy Publicity Equals Big Bust

“My doctor recommended *Ivory*.”

--- “*Sally Gibson*”

Lincoln, Me. (DG)—

The advantage of network radio during the 1930’s was the ability to come up with programming the major networks hoped would be popular with the radio listeners. Some ideas worked on the air; others didn’t. This article is going to focus on a major “**didn’t.**”

On Saturday, September 15, 1934 at 9:30 PM, ***THE GIBSON FAMILY*** was to air its first broadcast over the stations of **NBC’s Red Network**. This program was a combination musical, romantic comedy, and serial program within a 1-hour format. On paper, it was supposed to be the blockbuster program of the 1934-1935 radio season--- but a funny thing happened on the way to the season’s most popular radio program.

The program was about a typical American family named Gibson, which was a good thing because of the program’s name! Seriously, the typical American family consisted of Ma and Pa Gibson and their children Sally and Bobby. Although the Gibsons weren’t any different from other typical American families, there was a twist here. Sally and Bobby had exceptional singing voices and

were known for breaking out in song when the situation called for it. The main focus of the program was the romance between Sally Gibson and Jack Hamilton, another character with an excellent singing voice. The musical background of Sally, Bobby, Jack, and other major characters was to give the radio listeners a feeling they were listening to a Broadway musical.

In order to put a program of this magnitude on the air, it required a lot of money. In other words, ***THE GIBSON FAMILY*** needed a sponsor with big pockets. The program got a good one in ***Procter & Gamble*** in behalf of ***Ivory Soap*** and ***Ivory Flakes***, 2 of the company’s largest selling and best known products.

Before the program aired its first broadcast, there was heavy publicity of its debut. Of course, **NBC** was



doing its part in getting the word out over the airwaves. Since *Procter & Gamble* was shelling out the green stuff, the company also mentioned the program on the printed ads for *Ivory Soap* and *Ivory Flakes*. These ads introduced the characters to the readers and would-be listeners.

In the enclosed ad, Sally Gibson revealed her secret on why her complexion was so lovely. She used *Ivory Soap* and nothing else for her daily facials. Sally informed the readers that her skin was sensitive. Her doctor recommended washing with a mild, pure soap. Since *Ivory Soap* was pure--- 99 44/100% to be exact, Sally used it for her facials. The result was a complexion that was softer, smoother, and lovely to look at.

Not only was Sally an attractive young lady, she was also a smart one. In the same ad, the readers found out she used *Ivory Flakes* to wash her stockings. In talking with a friend, Sally gave a brief “**I told you so**” type of speech to her friend who washed her stockings with the infamous “**Other Soap.**” Unfortunately, the friend’s stockings had disgusting holes and runs. Sally never had that problem with her stockings, because she washed them every night in *Ivory Flakes*--- after she took them off, of course. Not only was there a complete lack of holes and runs, nightly washing in *Ivory Flakes* also helped to prolong the life of the stockings. It was the best of all worlds for Sally. She continued to wear the same stockings she washed in *Ivory Flakes*, and the money she saved from buying new ones was used for other purposes (including buying more *Ivory Flakes*).

Even on *THE GIBSON FAMILY* program, Sally wasn’t the least bit bashful in giving *Ivory* a plug. ■ Between acts, there was a brief intermission on the program--- a fancy name for the commercial. Announcer Jimmy Wallington took the listeners behind the scenes to the dressing room where Sally was hurriedly getting ready for the next act. Helping her was her maid Hilda. It was an exciting moment for Sally, but Hilda didn’t share in her happiness. The maid was depressed, because her boyfriend Henry acted distant to her. When Hilda mentioned her face had unsightly red blotches, Sally immediately knew the answer to the maid’s problems. Sally asked what soap Hilda used, and the maid replied it was a beauty soap that guaranteed radiant beauty. Sally stated that although Hilda’s soap was classified as a beauty soap, it also contained fats and alkali that actually did more harm than good. Instead of the beauty soap, Sally advised Hilda to use pure, mild *Ivory*. When Sally hurried off for the next act, Wallington informed the listeners Sally’s advice may or may not help Hilda attract Henry’s attention, but *Ivory* was guaranteed to help the maid have a younger looking, smoother complexion.

Despite Sally doing very well as an *Ivory* spokeswoman, there was a major concern from everyone involved with putting *THE GIBSON FAMILY* on the air. The program got off to a good start (it had the 17th highest **C.A.B. (Co-Operative Analysis of Broadcasting)** rating of the 1934-1935 season), but its **C.A.B.** rating was on a sharp downhill spiral since then. Since considerable money was spent, some major changes were needed. To do this, the program went off the air for about a month; then returned to the air.

THE GIBSON FAMILY returned to the air on Sunday, March 31, 1935 at 10:00 PM. This version was different from the original format. The romance between Sally and Jack wasn’t even mentioned in the storyline. Their romance may have continued, but the listeners didn’t know about it. To pour more salt on the wound, Sally’s role on the program was diminished. The program’s main focus was a traveling carnival setting up shop in the Gibsons’ hometown. The only consistency from the original format--- *Ivory Soap* and *Ivory Flakes* were still the sponsors.

Despite the changes, the second format didn't do any better than the first one. It stayed on the air for about 2 months. With 2 strikes and you're out, it was decided to pull the plug on the program completely.

What was supposed to be the most talked about radio program of the 1934-1935 season, ***THE GIBSON FAMILY*** went off the air quietly before the 1934-1935 season officially ended. Although Sally Gibson did her best Arthur Godfrey imitation in selling ***Ivory Soap*** and ***Ivory Flakes***, ***Procter & Gamble*** paid an expensive price for a program that was on the air for less than a year.

Despite the failure of ***THE GIBSON FAMILY***, the idea of a Broadway play for radio didn't die with it. On Tuesday, October 29, 1935, there was another attempt to make this idea work. It was heard on **NBC's Red Network**, but it was a new play and with a new sponsor. How well did this new program do? The answer to this very important question will be in the article "**Fire Chief Out, Elephant In**" on my website (www.dg125.com).