

Amos 'n Andy: The Chicago Defender's Response

by
Ryan Ellett

No old time radio program has spurred more controversy than Amos 'n Andy. Numerous articles and books have been written on the series and it inevitably is mentioned in nearly any work focused on radio history and especially the relationship between African Americans and radio. The debate over *Amos 'n Andy's* legacy is ongoing and will likely never be settled. In this article I would like to review a small slice of the debate, that of the contribution of the African-American newspaper The Chicago Defender. Interestingly, the paper's participation in the debate over both the radio and television versions of the show appears to be minimal considering the Defender's historical influence in the Black community.

The Chicago Defender was founded in 1905 by Robert Sengstacke Abbott. Initially it focused on local items of interest to the African-American community as well as news clippings from other papers. The newspaper's influence grew considerably during the teens and by the start of World War I two-thirds of its readership resided outside of Chicago. The Defender became a national voice for the Black community, reaching an estimated circulation of 250,000 at one point. It strove to cover trends such as the northern migration of Blacks and segregation.

Amos 'n Andy was itself a Chicago product, going on the air March 19, 1928 on WMAQ after a two-year stint as *Sam 'n Henry* on WGN. The first reference to the radio program in the Defender is a December 22, 1928, photo of their charity work.



IN CHRISTMAS APPEAL—Amos 'n' Andy, famous radio stars, who are helping spread Christmas joy by appealing for funds for Chicago's needy. They are shown here in Judge Torrelli's courtroom, where they appeared last Christmas. Mrs. Maude Roberts George, Defender music editor, is shown with basket.

—Defender Photo.

As you can see, the caption is neutral in regards to Gosden and Correll's race and their portrayal of two Black men.

The following year, 1929, was a busy one for the duo. By mid-year they were heard nationwide as a result of their efforts at independently distributing the program. By 1929 *Amos 'n Andy* gained a sponsor (Pepsodent, thanks to the work of advertising company Lord and Thomas) and a spot on the National Broadcasting Company's coast-to-coast chain. Over the next year it became a national sensation. Nevertheless, the series only warranted four mentions in the Defender during 1930.

The first was a general response to the stream of inquiries the paper was receiving concerning the actors' "racial identity." They are, the paper stated bluntly "white men" (7/5/30 p. 5). The paper offered no follow-up or effort to explain this incongruity. Perhaps the author felt there was no issue upon which to elaborate. This is the only reference to hint at the racial dichotomy of the hit program.

The second mention of the pair as they rocketed to fame was a blurb in the August 16 (p. 5) edition in which it is mentioned that Duke Ellington and his orchestra were met at the Los Angeles airport by a "special car owned by Amos 'n Andy" to whisk them off for rehearsals for the upcoming film *Check and Double Check*. They are mentioned again in passing in relation to an overtly-racist Alabama senator, Thomas Heflin, who had lost the Democratic Senate nomination because of his 1928 support for Republican presidential candidate Herbert Hoover. According to the Defender, "[Heflin's] erstwhile confreres in the senate have discovered that Amos 'n' Andy as entertainers are far more amusing" (11/15/30 p. 14). If not a rousing show of support for the duo, it indicates the paper did not find their act racist or insulting, at least compared to the antics of the former Senator.

Amos 'n Andy's final mention that year was in the December 6 (p. 5) issue and comes about as close to criticism as the Defender would offer during the program's heyday. It quotes a New York Herald-Tribune piece:

. . . if memory serves me right, Moss and Frye, who at one time were featured in several Broadway musical shows, created the phrase, "How much is a bunch of nickels?" that you heard broadcast the other night. So that you might know other of their expressions when you hear them "originated" over the air, here are a few: "Who is a governor of a certain state?" "How high is up?" and many other nonsensical lines that radio and Broadway comics are now taking credit for.

As the *Amos 'n Andy* frenzy peaked in 1931, the Defender granted them a mere seven references, one every other month on average. The first is a photograph of a pair of recently-born African-American twins Amos and Andy Pickett. Nary a comment about naming Black babies after two white men reaping vast profits off of their racial impersonations (2/28/31 p. A10).



COURTESY CHICAGO DAILY NEWS

TWINS NAMED AMOS 'N' ANDY—Amos 'n' Andy Pickett, twin sons of Mr. and Mrs. Burl Pickett, 2309 Foster Ave., Evanston, Ill., are enjoying themselves at the Foster school clinic there and so are the nurses. Amos 'n' Andy were born at 10:05 p. m. Nov. 28, shortly after Bill Hay announced to a vast radio audience that the regular program of the famous Amos 'n' Andy was about to begin. An interne at the county hospital, where the twins were born, suggested the names after remembering that the radio in the office was tuned to station WMAQ.

An April 18 (p. 24) caption compares a Chicago-based feature with a Black cast, *Careless Love*, which was heard Monday evenings on NBC, with the popular *Amos 'n Andy*. Three months later the *Defender* made its only reference to the racial controversy surrounding Gosden and Correll's portrayal of two African-American men. The July 18 (p. 5) piece was focused on a new black duo hitting the airwaves at the same time as "National Broadcasting's white Race mimickers." It seems no criticism is meant by the term "Race mimickers." The article goes on to acknowledge "Amos 'n Andy, who lately have been drawing fire from several sources . . ." That's it. That single partial sentence was the widely read Black newspaper's print contribution to the racial controversy, a mere nod to the fact that there was, in fact, some controversy.

To be fair, according to *Amos 'n Andy* expert Elizabeth McLeod, the *Defender*'s invitation of the pair to participate in its first Bud Billiken picnic was a direct response to the criticism they were receiving from selected African-American outlets. In fact, the majority of the newspaper's references to Gosden and Correll over the next few years were in regard to their participation in the annual picnic.

The Bud Billiken was a youth club targeted at the children who sold the *Defender*. The club held its first parade and picnic in 1929, ironically the first year *Amos 'n Andy* was heard nationwide and signed with NBC. The event continues to this day, drawing more than one million participants. The *Defender* excitedly announced "Amos 'n Andy to

Cheer Billikens at Picnic,” 1931 being the third edition. A subheadline blared “They’ll Give Candy to 15,000 Kiddies.” It was excitedly announced that Gosden and Correll had accepted the Defender’s invitation to participate, along with Duke Ellington and the Assistant Attorney General among others (8/15/31 p. 16).

Amos and Andy once again received large headlines the next week: “35,000 Cheer Amos ‘N’ Andy at Bud’s Picnic,” and “Radio Stars Get Big Ovation From Gang” (8/22/31 p. 16). Interestingly, though at the height of their fame and having been on the air for five years, the Defender indicates that a few “but not many” “recognized . . . the funnymen.” Such was the nature of radio fame. The article is nearly euphoric in recounting the events:

Bud then told the band to strike up the “Perfect Song,” the signature selection of “Amos ‘n’ Andy.” You thought it was lively before! You ain’t heard nothin’ yet! The crowd went wild - they did - they did. Amos ‘n’ Andy mounted chairs with megaphones, but you couldn’t hear your ears.

The radio boys waved greetings, smiled, laughed, tried to talk, but in vain.

Clearly enamored with the duo, the reporter goes on to highlight how Gosden and Correll stayed longer than many other high-profile guests, “saying hello and howdy-do to all they could reach out of the vast throng.” Perhaps recognizing the importance their publicity with the Black newspaper, Gosden insisted “We will never forget this day.”

The following week (8/29/31 p. 16) the Defender ran a picture of the men taken at the Billikens picnic. The event was still receiving ink the week after that when the paper printed a letter from Correll and Gosden. It read:

Attorney Nathan K. McGill,
The Chicago Defender,
3435 Indiana Ave.,
Chicago, Ill.

Dear Mr. Gill: We assure you that it was an extreme pleasure to be at your picnic last Saturday. We congratulate you on having such a perfect affair. We both enjoyed meeting you and hope to have the pleasure of seeing you again soon.

Cordially yours,

Amos ‘n’ Andy

(Correll and Gosden)

Such was the extent of *Amos ‘n’ Andy* newsworthiness insofar as the Defender was concerned in 1931 as the radio show’s popularity peaked. The following year they received considerably less ink, not that they received an overwhelming amount in 1931.

It was announced to readers on July 9, 1932 (p. 16) that negotiations had started to have Correll and Gosden again appear in person at the Billiken’s parade. Described as “those internationally famous monarchs of radioland,” a term the paper would apply to them again, the duo continued in the good graces of the publication. Alas, negotiations were not successful for whatever reason and Amos ‘n’ Andy did not appear that year. In fact, 1931 would be the only year they made a live appearance at the Billiken’s Parade and Picnic.

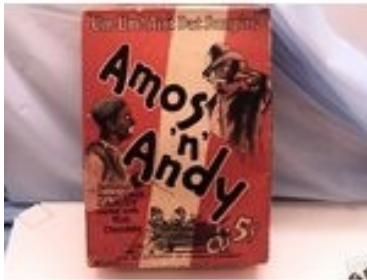
The pair’s 1932 contribution was 15,000 Amos ‘n’ Andy candy bars (8/20/32 p. 16). This would be their signature contribution for subsequent years as well. Christmas of 1932 saw Correll and Gosden once again get some positive publicity from the Defender

when they participated in the Defender's Christmas basket show held at the Regal theater. They entertained the audience of thousands with a performance then spent time discussing behind-the-scenes aspects of the radio program.

[They] explained as they went along just what role each plays in his nightly broadcasts and showed how the different effects are achieved. First there was Amos talking to Andy - then there was Lightnin', that loveable haracter who can't be made to hurry - then there was Brother Crawford, whose life is always so unhappy . . . (12/24/32 p. 4)

That characters such as Lightnin' and Brother Crawford didn't warrant a peep from the prestigious Black publication was certainly a coup on the duo's part.

From this point on, references to *Amos 'n Andy* are scarce in the pages of the Chicago Defender. They received obligatory positive press for donating 15,000 candy bars in between 1933 and 1941 (8/19/33 p. A4, 8/25/34 p. 15, 7/13/35 p. 7, 1/9/37, p. 13, 7/3/37 p. 12, 7/16/38 p. 12, 8/12/39, 8/3/40 p. 19, 7/26/41). The donation was upped to 20,000 bars in 1938 then lowered to 10,000 the next three years.



With their popularity waning a bit by 1933, Correll and Gosden still recognized the chance for positive press by again attending the Defender's Christmas charity show in 1933. They were rewarded with praise of their "wit and humor" and "many moments of happy relaxation since they started broadcasting" (12/16/33 p. 15).

In 1935 the two informed the Defender (via their secretary, Miss Summa), that "They think the Bud Billiken club is about the finest organization of its kind and for that reason you can just tell the kiddies that their friends Amos 'n' Andy are making the donations with a smile" (7/13/35 p. 17).

After acknowledging Amos 'n Andy's annual donation of candy bars for the Billikens Parade through 1941, they all but drop out of the magazine's sights. Until the television program's controversy in the 1950s the pair are mentioned just a handful of times. Correll's wedding to Alyce McLaughlin gets a tiny mention (9/18/37 p. 6) as does their donation to a Colored Farmers charity (10/30/37 p. 5). Due to the war, readers were told, Amos 'n Andy candy bars were discontinued. Instead, a donation of \$50 was made to the 1942 parade (7/25/42 p. 12). How many candy bars would that buy? On January 23, 1943 (p. 19) the Defender notes their plans to broadcast a testimonial on the recently deceased George Washington Carver. The readers were informed in 1947 that the comedians had once again sent a check (Amos 'n Andy candy bars a distant memory) to the annual Billiken "Carnival of Fun" (7/26/47 p. 4).



The shine was off *Amos 'n Andy* by 1951 as plans were underway for a new television program featuring the popular characters. Interestingly, twenty years after the

initial Amos 'n Andy uproar, the Defender's editorial board finally questioned the show's racial aspects:

Hollywood is convinced, if its casting is a criterion, that a white person can play the role of a Negro better than a Negro, and even radio has, at times, found the voice of a white man a more believable representation of a Negro's voice than the voice of a real Negro (1/20/51 p. 7).

Still, barely critical, and that criticism directed at the industry not the actors. While acknowledging that the radio version was "graced by wit and charm," the newspaper admits "it'll be interesting to see how well they manage it [the transition to television]. They got quite a problem on their hands" (5/12/51 p. 20).

Copyright 2010 – Ryan Ellett

 presents with pride  **Amos 'n'**



 **Andy**

on TV!



All America knows how Amos 'n' Andy made radio history. How their very names became household words in a matter of months. How even the severest critics acclaimed them for their fresh, wholesome humor. And once again, Amos 'n' Andy are about to make history! For now, Amos 'n' Andy go on television, sponsored by the Blatz Brewing Company of Milwaukee, makers of Milwaukee's Finest Beer. Now Amos 'n' Andy step into the very living rooms of the nation, bringing with them the special kind of entertainment that has become Americana. But more than that...

For the first time on television, America can see —is privileged to see—an all-star cast...an all-Negro cast...in a sterling half-hour of human drama and warm comedy. To see it week after week after week. This is not just another television program. This is the start of an era—an even greater era than the one Amos 'n' Andy created in the past.

Blatz Brewing Co., Milwaukee, Wis.

*Don't fail to see the opening show,
week of June 24th, on CBS*

*Consult your local newspaper
for time and channel.*

Little was made of the uproar that ensued over the television adaptation beyond two references to organizational opposition. The Defender reported that the New York NAACP had asked the Masons to assist in demanding the show's removal from the airwaves (09/08/51, p. 4) and that the United Auto Workers had also joined those opposed to the program (09/29/51, p. 4). The show's duration was short as was the attention given it by the Defender.

Correll and Gosden's final radio program, *Amos 'n Andy's Music Hall* received occasional attention from the Defender, primarily in the form of preview blurbs which may have been from the network and not an in-house writer. One Defender did have the

gall to suggest that the two should “consider it wise to mix races for their shows” (8/28/54 p. 7) considering they built their fame and fortune on imitating Black men. Still, compliments were set in ink on rare occasions. One was a bit of a backhanded compliment: “Amos ‘N Andy, funny as they are on Music Hall are usually found with guests that are as talented as the main stars” (06/16/56, p. 15). On the 500th broadcast of *Music Hall* one writer attested “the nightly gatherings of ‘the boys’ and their friends become more and more hilarious” (08/01/56). By 1957, thirty-one years after Correll and Gosden had first gone on the air, a column reminisced about what folks did before television. Among other activities they watched “those old time favorites Amos n’ Andy” (07/20/57, p. 15).

Of the television version of the radio program the Defender rendered this verdict eight years after its demise: The video version “never really clicked” (04/15/59). Three little words. Perhaps ignoring the show was worse than any criticism the publication could have leveled.

Further references to *Amos ‘n Andy* and Gosden and Correll are limited to an announcement that the Kingfish would not receive his own series with the death of actor Tim Moore (12/14/60), the two will be voicing the cartoon *Calvin and the Colonel* (02/11/61), reruns in Rochester, NY were being derided (12/17/62, 2/5/63), and that Channel 26 in Chicago was planning on rerunning the video series (5/26/64).

And so *Amos ‘n Andy* faded from the pages of the Chicago Defender just as it has faded from the collective memory of popular culture fans. Why the paper never gave the once-popular series more attention is not clear. Perhaps it tended to avoid pop culture news altogether. Perhaps the editors never saw much to criticize in the show. Conversely, perhaps they were ambivalent about the program, thus never able to bring themselves to come down on one side or the other regarding its racial appropriateness. So while old time radio fans will, in general, continue to defend the program and social and media historians, in general, will continue to condemn the program, perhaps the Defender’s coverage “said” it best by essentially ignoring the controversy - and the series - in favor of more newsworthy items.

McLeod, Elizabeth (2005). *The Original Amos ‘n’ Andy: Freeman Gosden, Charles Correll and the 1928 - 1943 Radio Serial*. Jefferson, NC: McFarland & Company, Inc., Publishers.

The Chicago Defender, individual issues cited in article.

<http://www.targetmarketnews.com/storyid08150602.htm>

<http://www.chicagodefender.com/article-1369-about-us.html>