

Helen Trent's First Days: The Pre-CBS Broadcasts
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Radio soap operas have never been one of the more popular genres within the old time radio community but they have long commanded the attention and interest of a small number of hobbyists. Jim Harmon's pioneering book *The Great Radio Heroes*, published in 1967, included a chapter on daytime serials and the genre's historical legitimacy was fully cemented by Jim Cox's two books on the subject, *The Great Radio Soap Operas* (McFarland, 1999) and the *Historical Dictionary of American Radio Soap Operas* (Scarecrow, 2005).

Perhaps one of the most fondly remembered sudsy series was *The Romance of Helen Trent* which ran 27 years, from 1933 to 1960. While the series has been generously chronicled by Cox, the series' earliest broadcasts from Chicago before it was picked up by the CBS network have not received much specific attention. This article seeks to shed some light on these initial episodes which caught the ears of local listeners, few of whom would suspect Helen Trent would visit their homes for nearly three decades.

The Romance of Helen Trent premiered on Chicago's WGN on July 24, 1933, at 2:30 in the afternoon and aired Monday through Friday. The new broadcast was described as “the life of Helen Trent, a brilliant and comely woman of 35 years who finds herself facing the world, obliged to make her own living again after 14 years of married life that ended in a divorce.” It continued, “Life begins at 35 for Helen Trent, and her battle for success has been woven into a great radio story.”

WGN actress Virginia Clark was chosen to play the title character, Helen Trent, a role with which she would be identified for a decade, from 1933 to 1943. Clark had been working on Chicago radio for some time, possibly as far back as 1931. In December, 1931, a Virginia Clark was chosen “maid of honor” - a runner-up – in a contest sponsored by the Radio Wholesalers' association and judged by various Chicago-area radio professionals. This Virginia Clark was described at the time as a “personality girl” for station WJJD. As a runner-up winner she made a brief appearance on WGN. About a year later a Virginia Clark was identified on a WBBM program alongside a duo billed as Gene and Charlie. Whether these are the same Virginia Clark cannot be determined with absolute certainty, but it seems reasonable to think they are.

The Virginia Clark who eventually played Helen Trent had her first job with WGN as hostess of *The Beer Garden Revue*, a half-hour weekly program which premiered in mid-April, 1933, and featured songs by Deane Janis. Janis had by that point been singing with Hal Kemp's band at the city's Blackhawk restaurant for the past year. She had also been featured for a month on the station's *Rhythms and Melodies* show which aired on Sunday evenings. Pierre Andre, famous for his work on *Little Orphan Annie*, was the commercial announcer and the Chicagoans, a quartet consisting of Edwin

Kemp, first tenor, Clinton Keithley, second tenor, Lewis Warehan, baritone, and Mark Love, bass, provided additional music. The foursome were regulars on WGN for the prior six months.

The *Revue* was soon renamed the *High Spot of the Air* and moved up half an hour to 8:00. Clark and the Chicagoans were joined by the High Spot symphonic dance orchestra and singer Arthur Wright, who had been a guest singer with Hal Kemp. The dance orchestra included Mr. Zipp, drums, Herbert Johnson, piano, Olda Jirousek, Gustav Kissel, Herman Julius, Jr., Al Wathall, Gaston Du Moulin, David Bennett, Arthur Barringer, Veran Florent, Fred Vopatek, Roger Wilson, Sam Jordan, and George Tansor. Janis was replaced by Natalie Alt just a short time into the series' run. Del Owen had directing responsibilities and was a WGN veteran of several years, having worked with Hal Moeller on the station in the late 1920s, possibly in connection with the station's popular German act *Louie's Hungry Five*.

At the time of *Helen Trent's* debut Clark has just wrapped up her thirteen-week run on the station's *High Spot of the Air* on which she portrayed the High Life Girl. Publicity statements claimed Clark was also an accomplished singer and the new *Helen Trent* program would allow her to display this talent. While Gil Whitney (portrayed over the years by Marvin Miller, William Green, and David Gothard) would become Trent's longtime beau, her initial love was an engineer named Grant Douglas played by Chicago radio actor Lester Tremayne.

Other players on the debut broadcast were Eugene McGillan who played lawyer John Haworth, Marie Nelson, who portrayed Aunt Agatha Anthony, and Tom Shirley who was cast as Stephen Clark. Lesser characters included Dolores Gillen as Nina Perry, the well-intentioned niece who caused considerable problems, and Gene O'Connor, attorney Haworth's office boy Dickie Mason, who is later revealed to be a lawyer. Love later bloomed between Nina and Dickie. The original writer was Bob Andrews and Blair Walliser handled production duties and directed the broadcasts. Donald Pontius was responsible for sound effects and also acted as assistant producer to Walliser.

The early story lines hinted at the pathology that would engulf soap operas of later years. Within two weeks of hitting the airwaves Trent's love Grant Douglas was already accusing the heroine of duplicity. He was positive Trent was using him as a pawn to win the love of Stephen Clark. Trent could hardly deal with this drama as at the same time she was forced to confront a customer at her place of employment, a music store, who claimed she had stolen a \$100 bill from him. That the money was eventually found under some sheet music portended serious trouble for Trent.

During the last week of August the series was bumped up to 1:45 to allow WGN to broadcast the Cubs and White Sox baseball games. As *The Romance of Helen Trent* opened its fifth week in September, 1933, the series returned to its original 2:30 time slot. The program had settled into a comfortable rhythm with Douglas and Clark trying to outdo each other for Trent's hand. Clark gained the upper hand in September when he got Helen to take a job at his store. The time was adjusted again in October when WGN aired the World Series. Helen Trent's story was scheduled to go out to listeners

directly after each game's conclusion; her serial was followed by *Just Plain Bill* and *The Beauty School of the Air*. Clark, meanwhile, continued to appear in other WGN programs such as *The Heart to Heart Club*, dramatizations of problems of the heart sent in by listeners.

After three months airing only in the Chicago market, CBS picked the program up on its coast-to-coast network beginning October 30, 1933. The primary actors, Clark, Tremayne, Gillen and O'Connor made the transition, continuing the serial where it had left off when heard only on WGN. A new thread was introduced with the network exposure; Helen finds a job at an upscale dress shop run by one Mary Steward who, it turns out, disdains Stephen Clark just as Helen has come to dislike him. This move to the CBS network coincided, ironically, with WGN's departure from Columbia's chain and reestablishment as a strong independent station.

The rest, of course, is history and *The Romance of Helen Trent* went on to become one of the highest-rated serials (reaching a 11.0 rating during the 1949-50 season) and the longest-running at 7, 222 broadcasts. Surely few of those figures involved in the program's earliest broadcasts which were limited to the Chicagoland area dreamed that Helen's story would span nearly three decades and captivate listeners across the entire country.



Publicity shot of Virginia Clark, 1933



Publicity shot of Les Tremayne, 1933