

## ***Phenomenon: Adventure in Syndication***

Ryan Ellett

While the world sunk further into depression in 1931, the radio industry boomed. Fortunes were made and lost as the technology improved rapidly, networks linked stations together coast to coast, and advertisers poured more and more money into this new form of entertainment. Radio was a virtual gold rush in grim economic times with no place for the timid.

A handful of men, however, worked outside the corporations which were consolidating their hold on the industry and forged an independent path to success. Bypassing the advertisers and networks, these men created their own programming then attempted to sell it to individual stations or to small sponsors to run in their locale, a strategy called syndication. It was grueling work selling their productions station by station, local sponsor by local sponsor, town by town.

Perhaps the first successful syndicated radio series was *Amos 'n' Andy*, whose initial success led to NBC picking it up for a national broadcast. The C. P. MacGregor Company out of Los Angeles found success in syndication in the early 1930s with such programming as *Cecil and Sally*, which has only been recently rediscovered by radio enthusiasts. From the late '30s into the mid '50s Frederick W. Ziv created several successful properties, including *The Cisco Kid*, *Boston Blackie*, and *Philo Vance*.

Still, there were many others who tried their hand at syndication and met with much less spectacular results. One such producer is the largely-forgotten Arthur Church out of Kansas City. Unlike typical syndication companies, Church actually owned his own station, CBS-affiliated KMBC. In addition to running original programming on his station, Church syndicated a handful of shows, selling them to stations and local sponsors around the country. One of Church's biggest efforts was *Phenomenon: Electrifying History*, produced during the 1930s.

As the '30s got underway, Church had a taste of national broadcasting exposure with KMBC's locally produced program, *Happy Hollow*, which was briefly added to CBS' coast-to-coast schedule in 1931; however, he was not satisfied. Church had grand visions of his aural creations bursting beyond Kansas City to captivate the nation. Despite being a small station in a mid-sized market, Church felt KMBC could produce programming to compete with the larger stations in New York, Chicago, and California.

*Phenomenon* was Church's first large-scale attempt to produce radio fare worthy of a national audience. For inspiration he did not look far. KMBC had actually aired a six-month run of *Phenomenon* using station staff from 1931 - 1932. This original series was the brainchild of Ted Malone, who would go on to many decades of radio work. Malone had penned the previously mentioned *Happy Hollow* so had experience writing for a nation-wide broadcast.

*Phenomenon* was originally created in conjunction with the Kansas City Power & Light company as a way to promote their electrical services. It followed the adventures of time-traveler Jerry Powers (played in this original 1931-32 run by Hugh Studebaker) and Thomas Light, inventor of the time travel device (played by Everett Kemp).

The earliest mention of *Phenomenon* so far discovered is a KCP&L inner-office memo dated Nov. 6, 1931. It reads:

Dear Employee, \$50 for names! \$30 first prize; \$15 for second, \$5 for third. We're going on the air again. Every evening at 6:15 on KMBC (except Sundays). We have a clever, snappy program full of adventure, thrills and fun. We want a name for it. Listen to it for a few evenings, then choose a name and send it to the advertising department. All names must be in by Nov. 16.

L. McKiddy

Station staff never found a better title than the original working title, so the series became permanently known as *Phenomenon*. Unfortunately, outside of the scripts, not a lot of information regarding the original 1931-32 run has survived. *Phenomenon* debuted November 9, 1931, at 6:15; its main competition was the Campbell Soup Orchestra playing dinner music on NBC-affiliate WDAF.

The first time travel trip took the series hero, Jerry, to Egypt where he met Cleopatra. This was followed by adventures with Napoleon and Beethoven and then to Salem, MA, Bethlehem, and revolutionary era Boston. Each adventure spanned several daily 15-minute episodes.

Evidence suggests Church was not starry-eyed in hoping *Phenomenon* might be a hit property. The show was proven to draw audience share. Audience surveys between February and April 1932, the last two months original run, revealed that during the program's airtime KMBC's audience share increased notably at the expense of their primary competitor, WDAF. Feeling he had a hit on his hands based on interest from the Don Lee Network and other stations, Church approached the World Broadcasting System as early as February, 1932, about recording the series.

KCP&L, however, was satisfied with six-month run and *Phenomenon* disappeared from the airwaves in April. Ever astute to a business opportunity, Church took notice of the burgeoning syndication market and he began pursuing that commercial avenue for his time-traveling program. An inter-department memo from November, 1933, requested that Ted Malone provide information about recording a 78-episode run of *Phenomenon* using the Kansas City studios. Various correspondence indicates that a test run of a few episodes was recorded in the mid-30s as a marketing tool but there was insufficient demand at the time to lead to a full series.

Church, with two decades of radio experience under his belt by the mid-1930s, was undeterred. As early as January, 1936, Church renewed his efforts and had salesmen approach Des Moines Electric Co. about purchasing a new syndicated version of *Phenomenon*. Company memos and sales letters increased and by fall of 1936 sales efforts were in full swing to Midwest power companies and radio stations.

By January, 1937, Church's confidence in the series was sky-high. He insisted to close associates they must find the perfect actor for the hero, Jerry Powers: "What we want to do is find a man who can go into pictures on *Phenomenon* or television which is coming within three years; a man whom we can make a star. If we handle this thing right we can make more money with *Phenomenon* than we can with KMBC." Two months later, in March, production finally began in Hollywood. The cast included Frederick MacKaye (time-traveler Jerry Powers), Jean Colbert (Katherine, Jerry's romantic interest), Hugh Conrad (announcer), and Robert Frazer (Dr. Light, inventor of the time travel machine). Claude Rains was contracted to play Napoleon for a multi-episode story arc. MacKaye (*What Price Glory*, *Front Page*, *Hollywood Hotel*, *Shell Chateau*), Colbert

(*March of Time*, *Cavalcade of America*, *Lux Radio Theatre*), and Conrad (*March of Time*) were solid radio thespians. Rains, of course, was a rising Hollywood actor and provided the star power.

While the year started well, production hit a snag when Church's staff became disappointed and frustrated with the results of some recordings. They went so far as to insist the second half of the series, originally recorded in Hollywood in June, be re-recorded in New York at World Broadcasting's expense (which it was).

Meanwhile, besides countless personal individual contacts to potential customer stations, Church worked the trade magazines trying to drum up business. An ad in the April 20, 1937, issue of Sales Management is typical of his efforts:

Radio's most unusual romantic-adventure serial - created exclusively for the electrical industry. An audience-tested plan for building increased load- a plan that covers every phase of the sales problems now confronting you. In electrical transcription form - Hollywood and Broadway artists - offered at practical prices. Auditions immediately available.

While Church's sales teams scoured the Midwest, they ultimately found success outside the region as well as inside. KMBC's inner-company publication *Phenomenon Exploitation Bulletin* No. 2 (undated) identifies the original group of purchasers who were promoting the new series in preparation for its debut. The list was as follows:

Indianapolis Power and Light Company, Indianapolis, IN  
Kansas City Power and Light Company, Kansas City, MO  
Texas Electric Service Company, Ft. Worth, TX  
Radio Station WBNF, Binghamton, NY (New York State Electric & Gas Corp.)  
Wheeling Electric Company, Wheeling, WV  
Radio Station KOY, Phoenix, AZ (Valley National Bank)  
Monongahela West Penn Public Service Company, Fairmont, WV  
Southwestern Public Service Co., Amarillo, TX  
Pacific Power & Light Co., Portland, OR  
San Diego Gas & Electric Co. (San Diego)  
Hawaiian Electric Co., Honolulu, HI

Sales efforts continued throughout 1937 with the series slated for release "at the end of daylight savings time." An August memo pegged the release more specifically for September 27, 1937. The pre-broadcast publicity blitz included quite a variety of tactics. Series purchasers received newspaper mats, advertising templates for electric bills, transcribed pre-announcements, and a booklet called "Flick the Switch." This booklet gave further information on "preparing counter cards, counter hand-outs with the displays, window streamers, posters, including billboards, street-car cards, car stickers, postage stamps" as well as audience-building tips and contest plans.

Public reaction to *Phenomenon* once it finally hit the airwaves was mixed. A December letter from WFBM in Indianapolis notes "poor ratings behind Easy Aces and Amos 'n Andy" (indeed an unenviable time slot). A West Virginia study from January, 1938, discouragingly relates "only 20% of those interviewed gave station running *Phenomenon* as their favorite station." All news, however, was not negative for *Phenomenon*. A note from the Arizona Network in February, 1938, reported "good

results” in Phoenix, Tucson, and Bisbee. A survey by the Ross Federal Research Corporation found that *Phenomenon*’s original broadcasting station, KMBC, beat its competitor by 13 percentage points during the program’s air slot with the revamped series.

Despite spots of good news, Church and company sensed things were not going as well as hoped. Meeting notes indicate discouragement among staff members. Church admitted in a letter that “it would . . . be very poor judgment for me to barge ahead on the next 65 episodes without first seeing my way through the present tangles.” Those “present tangles” never were adequately solved, leaving dozens of further scripts unproduced.

Within a year Church and KMBC began to turn their attention to other efforts, notably *The Texas Rangers* (a singing group, not the dramatic series) and *Brush Creek Follies*, two western-themed properties that would ultimately prove to be more successful than *Phenomenon*. Still, the series was not written off. Documents show that Church’s staff continued to sell *Phenomenon* for years to come.

Three years later, in 1940, George Halley, Church’s Chicago-based salesman, wrote to encourage Church to make a big push at getting General Electric to sponsor the show. Indeed, further documents dated 1940 indicate the station may have considered updating the series or even producing a new run. Included in these documents is a brief outline of the *Phenomenon* concept. Perhaps as an acknowledgment of the program’s lack of popularity in the past, an unknown writer laid out a treatment of the series focusing on its dramatic merits:

To prevent the episodes from lapsing into a series of historical vignettes - there will be an underlying psychological and emotional basis which will be the binding factor - the cause for the listener to become a “regular” - feeling that he has to listen each week in order to follow the developments of the characters.

Even two scripts survive, dated 1940, that do not coincide with the 111 scripts available from the earlier 1937 run. Both appear to reflect a half-hour program, “Richard the Lion Hearted Part 1” at 23 pages and “Masquerade at Bath” 22 pages. No evidence exists, however, that new productions were ever recorded.

Even by 1943, six years past the original release of the 65 syndicated episodes and twelve years past *Phenomenon*’s original debut in Kansas City, Halley had enough confidence in *Phenomenon* to write a two page memo to Church encouraging him to revive attempts to sell the show. For much of the series’ existence Church had apparently never wavered from his focus on selling the show to power companies. But in 1943 Halley encouraged Church to expand his sales vision and pursue some large national advertisers. Arguing for various reasons that the time was right for a *Phenomenon* revival, he recommended that they look at consolidating the 65 daily episodes into 26 weekly half hour programs. Halley concludes his letter stating, “This whole matter seems to me of very real *urgency* at this particular time and an *immediate decision* is earnestly begged for” (italics Halley’s). Ultimately, a national sponsor was not found for *Phenomenon*, but Church never gave up on the program. As late as 1950, just a few years before he sold KMBC and nearly two decades after it first aired, sales efforts were underway with a Hawaiian network.

The story of *Phenomenon* provides a rich, behind-the-scenes glimpse of what went into creating a syndicated radio program. It also demonstrates the fickle nature of radio success; years of planning, hard work, significant financial investment, and supreme confidence could not make a hit out of even a series which boasted a unique premise with its time-traveling hero. For every Frederic Ziv who achieved notable fame and wealth with his broadcasting work there must be countless Arthur Churches who, often for reasons outside their control, have been forgotten by radio historians and still await rediscovery by those who appreciate radio's Golden Age.