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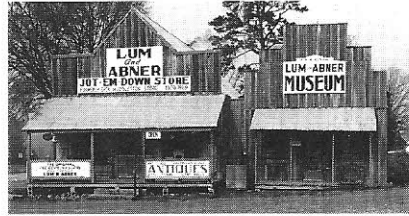
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**THE NATIONAL
LUM AND ABNER
SOCIETY**

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PRESIDENT

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EXECUTIVE SECRETARY

Tim Hollis

Front Cover: Chet Lauck and Norris "Santa" Goff take their children Gretchen and Chet Jr. Christmas shopping, circa 1942. The kids say, "Tanks a lot, pop." (Photo courtesy of Mandy Lauck)

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THE JOT 'EM DOWN JOURNAL

December 2002

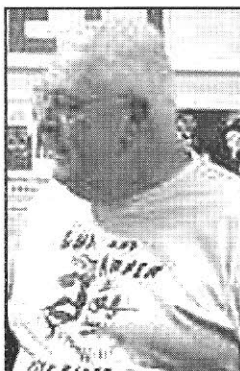
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IN MEMORY



GERALD MAY



DONNER BROWN

The NLAS would like to offer condolences to the families of two NLAS members who recently passed away. Chronologically, we were notified of the passing of Mr. **Gerald May**, who had been a notable fixture at the NLAS Conventions, even attending in 2001 by postponing needed surgery. Attendees will remember how the Mays encouraged other members of their family to come forward and sing "They Cut Down the

Old Pine Tree" at the conclusion of some of the conventions. Mr. May was always smiling, jovial and enthusiastic and we will miss him very much.

Our vice-president **Sam Brown** notified us more recently of his father's passing. Mr. **Donner Brown** always took pride in Sam's pioneering and current involvement in the National Lum and Abner Society, but due to various health and family situations was unable to attend our conventions. Sam fondly recalls his father's discussions of Lum and Abner and other classic radio programs, and credits this with his own interest in this genre of broadcasting.

We offer our best wishes and prayers for the families, and thank them for their friendship.

70 YEARS OF LUM AND ABNER®

If you will kindly recall (or at least look back at our August issue!), when we last left Lum and Abner in the summer of 1932, things weren't looking too spiffy. In August they had managed to get back on the air via WBAP in Fort Worth, Texas, but were in effect sponsoring themselves by advertising their self-written book *Lum and Abner and their Friends from Pine Ridge*. We do not know just how long this arrangement lasted, but by October apparently they were "at liberty" (show biz terminology for "out of work") again. On October 13, the *Mena Star* carried a small announcement in its personals column that sounded vaguely like history was repeating itself:

A surprise came to Mena radio listeners Saturday night when KTHS at Hot Springs brought the well known voice of Chester Lauck, in charge of an old-time program. The famous "Lum" was "Uncle Jake" in the program and the announcement was that the program might be given again at an early date.

It must have been somewhat frustrating... after a year and a half of radio work and being featured daily over NBC, now it appeared Chet Lauck was back where they began... and even starting a possible new format. Just what the Goffs were doing during this period is completely undocumented. The Lauck half of the team was again the focus of the next news item, which appeared on November 3:

"LUM" HAS IMPORTANT ANNOUNCEMENT TO MAKE

***Daughter was born to Mr. and Mrs. Chester
Lauck Friday night***

"Lum & Abner," nationally known radio entertainers, have in the past broadcasted some important news, but the most important of anything they ever had to put on the air is the happenings of Friday night, October 28. The big news is that "Lum" is again a father, a baby daughter having been born at Hot Springs to Mrs. Chester H. Lauck. The happy event took place at 9 p.m. and the baby girl weighed nine pounds. Mena relatives were advised of the arrival of the new daughter, who was named Nancy Jane. Mr. and Mrs. Lauck have been at Hot Springs for some weeks past, awaiting the coming of the stork.

Now it seemed more imperative than ever to get the show back

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Nancy Lauck during her modeling days.

on the air, since the Laucks had an additional mouth to feed. (They already had one daughter, Shirley, but as yet the Goffs had not produced any children.)

Although it is a bit outside our scope of discussion here, we should acknowledge that Nancy Lauck met a tragic fate. After growing up to be a beautiful young woman, she did some modeling, but her career was cut short at age 21, when she was killed in an automobile accident in May 1954.

Back in 1932, the Laucks and the Goffs somehow ended up in Cleveland, Ohio, home of one of that era's powerful clear channel radio stations, WTAM. The exact arrangements made to give them a spot on this station have not yet surfaced, but on November 24 the *Mena Star* was happy to report:

"LUM & ABNER" AGAIN

***Mena humorists will be on the air from station
WTAM***

"Lum & Abner" are going on the air again, starting Thanksgiving evening. Word has been received in Mena from Chester H. Lauck and Norris Goff that they will begin broadcasting Thursday from WTAM at Cleveland, Ohio. The Ouachita entertainers with their pleasing humor and mountaineer philosophy, have contracted with the Ohio station to give their entertainments at 6:15 p.m. daily, the hour meaning 5:15 in Mena and the middle west.

This was good news for all involved, but apparently getting to Cleveland sounded easier than it really was. The story of *Lum and Abner* could have ended right here, as the newspaper reported on December 1:

"LUM & ABNER" IN AN AUTOMOBILE WRECK

But Mena radio performers were not injured; car damaged

"Lum & Abner," who are now giving two-a-day programs at station WTAM at Cleveland, Ohio, had a real reason to be thankful last week, according to word received from the young radio entertainers. While traveling from Chicago to Cleveland, the day preceding Thanksgiving, their car skidded on an ice coated pavement, left the roadway and landed upside down in a snow-bank. Though there was considerable glass broken in the crash, neither "Lum" nor "Abner" were hurt and their car was not badly damaged. "Lum" was driving at the time and "Abner" was sleeping, but soon woke up according to messages received by homefolks. The young men are still employed by the NBC and their best program obtainable in Mena is at 5:15 p.m. Radio fans can get WTAM by dialing between KTHS and KMOX.



Lum & Abner strike a familiar pose at the WTAM microphone.

Despite their crackup (nothing was said as to where their wives and the two Lauck children were during all this havoc), Chet and Tuffy made it to Cleveland after all. Somehow or other, during negotiations for their show, WTAM manager Warren Wade had come up with the idea of having the continuing L&A storyline be heard Monday through Thursday, and then on Fridays broadcast a half-hour studio audience show that would be known as "Lum & Abner's Friday Night Sociable." It could be that Wade had visions of this broadcast becoming as well known as the already-established *National Barn Dance* from Chicago or *Grand Ole Opry* from Nashville.

That may not have happened, but the Friday Night Sociable did have some high-octane talent behind it. Our late friend, character actor Jerry Hausner, related at the 1987 NLAS convention his experiences in meeting L&A during preparations for this new format:

I first met Lum and Abner in Cleveland. I was born in Cleveland, and I left there in 1929 to go to New York to seek my fortune... I picked the worst year in history to go into show business! The stock market had crashed, and I didn't know anything about that, so I went to New York to look for a job. I wandered around there for a while and finally got into a vaudeville act, making \$75 a week which was terrific at that time. I was able to live on \$25 of the \$75, put \$25 in the bank, and send \$25 to my folks. There were five people in my family at home who couldn't make \$25 a week between them because of the Depression!

So, as I was traveling across the country I stopped in Cleveland for a couple of days to visit my folks, and went down to WTAM to visit Warren Wade, the man who had originally taken me out of a drug store and put me on the stage. I went to pay him my respects, and he said "Oh, I'm so glad to see you... I've got a couple of boys here from Arkansas sitting in the back room, and I don't know what to do with them." So we went back and we met.. they were maybe five or six years older than I was.. and I said, "What do you guys do?" They said, "We play these two old men," and I couldn't believe it. I asked, "Do you do it visually?" And they said, "No, we do it on the radio."

I found out later how they had gotten their show on the air, but had been dropped and now they were in Cleveland... getting, I think, \$35 a week between them for doing two 15-minute live broadcasts a day. It was hardly enough for them to live on. So they were now planning this audition for a Friday Night Sociable, and Mr. Wade said, "If you're going to be in town for another few days, maybe you could write yourself into this thing and do a little spot with them." So I said all right and wrote a page of dialogue for myself with standard jokes I had stolen from Milton Berle, and played a guy with a medicine show that came in from out of town.. a typical city slicker. The boys looked it over and said, "Yeah, let's do this."

So on Friday night we came to the studio to do the show, and they had a trio called the Dritzen Boys, Scandinavian folk singers.. and they had a trio called Annie, Judy and Zeke, who turned out to be Zeke Manners (a big star later on) and Judy Canova.. then there was a girl singer by the name of Frances Langford.. all these people were on this show, and there was an audience too. I waited for my scene, while the boys were ad-libbing their way through the thing, and then I came in with my



JERRY HAUSNER

script and said hello... and they didn't pay any attention to the cue at all! They just went right on doing what they were doing, and left me there with all these half jokes. I had no answer at all for anything, because they didn't ask me

any of the proper questions! So we ad-libbed some kind of foolishness between us and got through it. But the show sold, because no matter what they did they were always great.

Jerry may have been incorrect about the paltry salary Lauck & Goff were getting at the time... or maybe not. We shall see about that in a few minutes. Anyway, another later celebrity who was involved at this point was Louis Marshall Jones. Don't recognize the name? You will soon. Jones had been playing in a "hillbilly music" (as country music was known at the time) band with Warren Caplinger and Andy Patterson, and as he related in his autobiography, some exciting news had come their way:



WARREN WADE

One day in the late fall of 1932, Cap came to us and said that the team of Lum and Abner needed a string band for the new radio show they were starting over WTAM in Cleveland. This was real news. Lum and Abner's show had been started just the year before by a couple of young businessmen from Mena, Arkansas; they were Chester Lauck (Lum) and Norris Goff (Abner). The show had become a nationwide success, and on Thanksgiving night they were going to move to Cleveland and begin a new season. Along with their regular show, they were going to have a "Friday Night Social" program which would be broadcast from an imaginary country schoolhouse. They needed the old-time string band for this part of the show. It would really be the big time.

We had already been playing in a little string band, so we just formed it up and went down to audition. It was a good band. Andy and a guy named Davy West played the fiddle, Cap and I played guitars, Joe Troyan did the harmonica, a man named George Coleman played the banjo, and some older man whose name I don't recall played the bass fiddle with a bow. As I said, Cap and Andy were both good enough that they had made quite



L&A with the Pine Ridge String Band

a few records, so we weren't exactly an amateur group. After the audition, Lum and Abner wanted to know how much we would charge. Cap told Lum he didn't know what to charge, so Lum said they could give us \$10 a man and pay our expenses. Cap said later he nearly fell over; he had been set to ask for \$25 for all six of us! We struck a bargain and went out of the studio to pile into Andy's Nash Twin Ignition Six; on the way home we were feeling pretty good. It looked like a good Christmas.

If L&A were making only \$35 a week, as Jerry Hausner claimed, it seems unlikely that they could have made such a generous offer to the Pine Ridge String Band... therefore, the skimpy salary Jerry remembered could have been what they were getting from their previous self-sponsored engagement on WBAP. We may never know.

Okay, we'll get ahead of ourselves a bit now. After approximately a year and a half with *Lum and Abner*, the Friday Night Sociable ended and the string band went on to other ventures. Louis Marshall Jones was inspired by seeing Lauck and Goff apply their old man makeup for their stage appearances, and soon began modeling himself after the same style. That was when, at age 22, he became known as "Grandpa" Jones, and of course anyone who is familiar with *The Grand Ole Opry* or *Hee Haw* knows what became of him.

What is less known is the later career of Warren Wade, Jerry Hausner's benefactor and creator of the Friday Night Sociable. Fifteen years later, Wade had worked his way up the NBC corporate ladder and was with the network's fledgling television division in New York City, where in December 1947 he came up with another winner: the *Howdy Doody* TV show. ("I grannies, Buffalo Bob, I bleave that's our ring"?)

For now, with *Lum and Abner* back on the air and everyone looking forward to the holiday season, we will leave the story here. 1933 would bring even more and greater events, and it is somewhat safe to say that from that point on, for Lauck and Goff at least, days would be merry and bright and all their Christmases would be white.

- Tim Hollis

LUM and ABNER®:

ATTACK OF THE CLONES

PART TWO OF A SERIES

In our October issue, we began this look at some of the radio shows that seem to have been blatant copies of LUM & ABNER. For this issue, we go in the opposite direction and look at some of the rural situation comedies that preceded the two old gents from Pine Ridge. We enlisted the help of well-known 1930s radio historian Elizabeth McLeod for this feature, and here is what she was able to find out:

When Chet Lauck and Tuffy Goff traveled to Chicago in 1931 to begin their careers as network radio performers, they became the newest in a series of “rural” acts to make their mark in network broadcasting. Since the late 1920s, urban listeners had looked back with a sort of fuzzy nostalgia on the small-town way of life — and rural listeners, for their part, enthusiastically followed programs with which they could identify.

Most of the rural programming of early radio was musical — “hillbilly” or “mountain music” performers were ubiquitous from the mid-1920s forward, with such programs as the WSM *Grand Ole Opry* and the WLS *National Barn Dance* gaining national followings. But there were also programs that presented rural characterizations in a dramatized format — laying a groundwork to be built upon by Lauck and Goff.

Radio drama in the United States traces its beginning to Schenectady, New York — where in the fall of 1922, station WGY began a weekly series of radio adaptations of popular stage plays, prepared and performed by a group of local amateur actors under the banner of “The WGY Players.” Their techniques were heavily influenced by the stage — but also included rudimentary exploration of basic techniques of radio acting and sound effects. Drama was a minor element of radio broadcasting in the U.S. for the next several years, although a few stations followed WGY’s example in forming local radio stock companies. Most of the material performed by these troupes were adapted from stage works — although as early as 1923, producer-writer Fred Smith of WLW in Cincinnati was creating original works for the broadcast medium.

But the most important step forward in dramatized radio occurred in January 1926 — when two comic harmony singers named Freeman F. Gosden and Charles J. Correll first took the air over WGN, Chicago as *Sam ‘n’ Henry*. In nightly 10-minute dialogues, performed in African-American dialect, Correll and Gosden told an open-ended,

serialized story — relating incidents from the daily experiences of two working-class black men who had left their home in the rural South for new lives in Chicago. Correll and Gosden were the first radio performers to use the medium to tell a continuing story about continuing characters — the first radio performers to break completely from the techniques of the stage in presenting dramatized radio — and the first radio performers to season their stories with comedy drawn from personality and situation, and not from jokes or gags. The evolution of *Sam ‘n’ Henry* into *Amos ‘n’ Andy*, and the latter program’s explosive popularity as radio’s first syndicated feature, and later as a network program, would mark the beginning of Radio’s Golden Age. And the methods invented by Correll and Gosden would influence many performers to follow.

While Sam and Henry are primarily remembered as “black characters,” it is often forgotten that they were also “rural characters” — born and raised in a small town outside Birmingham, Alabama — and much of the early humor in *Sam ‘n’ Henry* stemmed from the characters’ adjustment to the complexities of city life. The characters were unprepared by background or education for the hectic pace of life in Chicago — or for the army of grifters, chisellers, and swindlers which seemed to lie in wait on every corner, waiting to separate the gullible from their greenbacks.

While acknowledging the humor which grew out of Sam and Henry’s difficulties in adjusting to their new lives, Correll and Gosden were also careful to present their characters in a sympathetic light — allowing listeners to see their own life experiences mirrored in the experiences of Sam and Henry and their friends, and allowing rural audiences to see their own perspectives reflected in the attitudes of the characters. The homey rural values espoused by Sam — and later by Amos of *Amos ‘n’ Andy* — stressed the importance of friendship, family, and common sense, as opposed to the hard-charging, aggressive, get-rich-quick ways of the city. This contrast between “simple country people” and “city slickers” — a staple of 19th Century popular humor, Victorian melodrama, and early film — would prove to be the dominant message of the many rural-themed radio programs following in *Sam ‘n’ Henry*’s wake.

The earliest and most important performer to follow in the wake of Correll and Gosden’s early success was George Frame Brown — a young, East Coast stage actor who had achieved minor success with the Provincetown

Players in the early 1920s. By chance, Brown received an invitation to broadcast a sketch over New York station WRNY in mid-1926, and in doing so, demonstrated his skill for multiple voice characterizations. His initial appearance led to a series of return engagements over WRNY, and by early 1927 he had landed at WABC — where he appeared as both the arcane Chinese philosopher “Dr. Mu”, and the Swedish-dialect “Captain Petersen of the Silver Wave.”

In the fall of 1927, Brown moved to WOR in Newark — where he created the program that would set the pace for the rest of his career. *Luke Higgins' Main Street Stories* featured Brown as Luke, a kindly old philosopher character living in the “typical upstate town” of Titusville. *Luke Higgins* was originally a one-shot program, aired on Thanksgiving night 1927 as part of an evening of rural-themed “Barn Dance” entertainment. Brown’s sketch was a simple routine, drawn from real life — and like Correll and Gosden, Brown avoided the use of jokes or gags — allowing the humor to flow naturally from situation and character.

The *Luke Higgins* sketch drew a dramatic response from WOR listeners, and during the winter of 1928, it became a weekly half-hour feature on WOR. In this series, Luke was drawn as a simple country storekeeper — whose General Mercantile Establishment was the center of Titusville life, and who was based to a considerable extent on a real-life country storekeeper Brown had known during his days in Provincetown. It is likely, then that *Luke Higgins' Main Street Sketches* was the first radio program to exploit the general-store setting that would form such a vital element in the world of *Lum and Abner*.

The success of *Luke Higgins* carried Brown in the summer of 1928 to NBC in New York — where he was signed to a network contract. However, just as happened to Correll and Gosden with *Sam 'n' Henry*, Brown was forced to leave his established program behind when he made the move — *Luke Higgins* was owned by WOR, and the Newark station would continue the program after Brown’s departure with Don Carney — not yet the famous “Uncle Don” — replacing him in the title role.

As Correll and Gosden did in turning *Sam 'n' Henry* into *Amos 'n' Andy*, Brown gave NBC a series that was in reality only a thinly veiled reworking of his original feature. *Luke Higgins* became “Matt Thompkins,” Titusville became “Thompkins Corners,” and *Main Street Stories* became *Real Folks* — NBC’s first continuing-character dramatic feature, making its debut in August 1928. Like its WOR predecessor, *Real Folks* was a weekly half hour, revolving around small-town life — with the focal point being the local general store, and its wise and witty proprietor. Matt Thompkins was the mayor of Thompkins Corners, and had his hand in everyone’s business — and the story of his involvement with the affairs of the townsfolk intertwined with his own family life. *Real Folks* soon picked up the sponsorship of the Chesebrough Manufacturing Company, makers of Vaseline, and continued under that firm’s sponsorship for nearly four years.

In early 1932, General Foods carried the program for a final season for Log Cabin Syrup before dropping it in April of that year. Brown had simply run out of steam after

The Real Folks: From Left—George Frame Brown, Phoebe Mackaye, Mrs. H. Stevens, Virginia Farmer, Joyce Brown, Roger Marsh, Geoffrey Warwick, (seated) Tommy Brown. And are they Real?



George Frame Brown, famous as “Matt Thompkins.”



Creating Radio REAL FOLKS

GEORGE FRAME BROWN, actor-playwright, has created characters so real and so convincing to the listeners that thousands believe the broadcasts actually come from Thompkins Corners.

five years, and his program had gotten lost in the explosion of serials which flooded the air in the wake of the *Amos 'n' Andy* craze of 1930-31. Brown would return to the stage, but in the spring of 1935 he made a brief radio comeback — resurrecting “Gus,” a Swedish-dialect supporting character from *Real Folks* as one of the leads in *Tony and Gus*, an obscure comedy serial which co-starred opera singer Mario Chanlee as Tony. This series faded away by the fall of 1935, and its failure marked the end of Brown’s radio career. He returned to the theatre, his pioneering work in broadcasting forgotten.

Another important early figure in rural-oriented radio drama was William Ford Manley. A Broadway playwright in the early 1920s, and a native New Englander, Manley joined the continuity staff at NBC-New York in 1927 turning out scripts for a variety of programs. In 1928, he created his most important series for the Standard Oil Company of New York. Entitled *Soconyland Sketches*, the program began as a weekly anthology program telling stories from the history of “Soconyland” — the New England-New York area in which Socony products were sold. However, within a short time, the series began telling stories of contemporary rural life in New England and upstate New York, with a regular cast headed by stage actor Arthur Allen and Maine native Parker Fennelly. One of Manley’s most popular scripts from this era, entitled “Sebago Lake,” was presented several times over the course of the program’s run — and told the story of a harried New York businessman who found an unexpected sense of peace in a springtime fishing trip to Maine. Arthur Allen’s characterization of a philosophical fishing guide in “Sebago Lake” served as the template for the character he would play for the rest of his radio career.

By 1933, *Soconyland Sketches* had begun alternating its anthology stories with a continuing series set in the mythical town of Snow Village, Vermont. Allen brought his “philosophical New Englander” character to full flower in this series, in the role of Dan’l Dickey — a gentle, long-suffering farmer who doubled as Snow Village’s game warden, and was a leading figure in town affairs. Dan’l’s life was complicated by his demanding wife Hattie — and by his love-hate relationship with Hiram Neville. Played by Parker Fennelly as a harsh, flinty old man, Hiram was

Snow Village's truant officer — the merciless enemy of all small boys playing hooky — and was Dan's adversary in any number of land deals, horse trades, and checker games.

Soconyland Sketches ended in 1935, but Manley revived the "Snow Village" characters the following year in *Snow Village Sketches*. The series ran on and off for various sponsors in various formats for the next decade — and typecast Arthur Allen and Parker Fennelly for the rest of their lives.

While working on *Soconyland Sketches*, Allen and Fennelly crossed paths with another ambitious New Englander — a pushy, aggressive Mainer named Phillips H. Lord. Lord strongarmed his way into broadcasting after hearing a New England-dialect program — possibly *Soconyland Sketches* itself — that he felt misrepresented the realities of rural life. In response, he created *Sunday Evening at Seth Parker's*, an odd combination of dialect humor, rural drama, and soft-soaped religion that became a major hit for NBC in 1929.

[EDITOR'S NOTE: During the 1985 NLAS Convention, longtime L&A scriptwriter Roz Rogers cited "Seth Parker" as a regular feature of his family's radio listening habits in the days before he entered the business himself.]

In 1930, Lord jumped on the serial bandwagon — deciding to exploit the *Amos 'n' Andy* craze with a serial about two New England types, and recruited Arthur Allen and Parker Fennelly to join him in the feature. The resulting series, *Uncle Abe and David*, was sold to B. F. Goodrich Tire and Rubber Company, and enjoyed a run of nearly two years on NBC. Originally, the serial was set in the real-life town of Skowhegan, Maine — where Uncle Abe and his nephew David were the proprietors of a typical country store. However, midway through the program's run, Lord made the program an even more explicit *Amos 'n' Andy* imitation — having Uncle Abe and David sell their store and move to New York, where the theme of the program quickly evolved into "rural naifs adjusting to life in the big city."

Unwilling to abandon Maine as a setting for a comedy serial, however, Lord, Allen, and Fennelly created another program in June 1931 — *The Stebbins Boys of Bucksport Point*. Arthur Allen was John Stebbins, a long-suffering storekeeper, and Parker Fennelly appeared as Esley Stebbins, his ambitious but none-too-bright brother. Sponsored by Swift's Meats, the program ran into 1932,



The Stebbins Boys

• Arthur Allen and Parker Fennelly, better known as "The Stebbins Boys," air the small town strife of two brothers over the WJZ-NBC chain at 7:30 every Monday, Tuesday, Wednesday and Thursday night, and over the WEAF-NBC network at 6:45 every Friday night. Their true-to-life accent, no less than the truly rural script they follow, has made them favorites throughout the country. Here Mr. Allen seems to be defending the harmless, necessary cat against some foul design of Mr. Fennelly.

attracting an especially strong following in New England. Of all the early rural series, *The Stebbins Boys* is probably the clearest prototype for what would become the familiar format for *Lum and Abner*.

Phillips H. Lord might have spent the rest of his career creating endless variations on these themes — but for an incident which sullied his "kindly old New Englander" image forever. As a promotional stunt, Lord in 1933 bought a three-masted schooner, had it restored, and announced plans for a 'round the world *Seth Parker* cruise. The ship would be in constant shortwave contact with NBC in New York, and the regular *Seth Parker* cast would remain stateside, continuing the program and allowing for frequent shortwave inserts from "Seth" as he traveled the high seas.

However, the schooner was wrecked in a tropical storm off the coast of Fiji in early

1935 — amidst rumors that Lord and his crew were devoting much of their time to drinking and wild carousing of the sort that would have shocked the folks back in Jonesport. Unable to pick up the pieces of *Seth Parker's* shattered image, Lord abandoned rural characterizations forever and turned to "true crime" stories — making an enduring mark as the creator of *Gang Busters*. Arthur Allen and Parker Fennelly would have to find future work on their own.

These were the major rural-themed programs preceding and surrounding *Lum and Abner* as Chet and Tuffy made their first tentative forays into network radio. There were others even more obscure — such as *Moonlight and Honeysuckle*, a story of feudin' and fightin' among West Virginia mountaineers by playwright Lulu Vollmer — or *Mountainville True Life Sketches*, a 1929-30 series by CBS staff writer Yolande Langworthy which featured a cast made up entirely of children acting out typical small town doings. And although all of these programs are forgotten — for the most part, undocumented by recordings and surviving, if at all, as dusty, brittle scripts buried in obscure archives — they were still a vital part of the broadcasting scene at the start of *Lum and Abner's* career. And it's testimony to the abilities of Chet Lauck and Tuffy Goff that they emerged from among these rival programs to carve out their own distinctive niche on broadcasting history.

- Elizabeth McLeod

'Twas the Week Afore Christmas with The Stebbins Boys

On the previous pages you saw Elizabeth McLeod's history of *The Stebbins Boys*, generally acknowledged as the nearest ancestor to *Lum and Abner* (with some genes from *Amos 'n' Andy* present in both, of course). Even Chet Lauck himself, in the 1973 documentary *Two Boys from Mena*, mentioned that because *The Stebbins Boys* was set in a general store, L&A would not use that as their scenario until after the earlier show had left the air.

No recordings of *The Stebbins Boys* have yet been discovered; however, a number of the show's scripts have been preserved as part of the collection at the Library of American Broadcasting in College Park, Maryland. As with most such collections, there are restrictions on how much material can be photocopied and how it may be used, but the NLAS was fortunate enough to obtain a week's worth of *Stebbins Boys* scripts for our research purposes, and these five episodes are enough to give a true idea of the flavor of the show.

It is especially timely that we discuss these programs in this issue, because what we have is the week of Christmas 1931. Each of the scripts is marked "Copyright 1931 by Henry Fisk Carlton," so we hereby acknowledge that in case any of Mr. Carlton's heirs are reading this. The first of the five scripts is the show for Monday, December 21, and is numbered as script #131. Mathematically speaking, this would indicate that *The Stebbins Boys* series began on June 22, 1931. Interestingly, this would have roughly coincided with the period when Chet Lauck and Tuffy Goff were in Chicago, auditioning *Lum and Abner* for NBC after their initial success on KTHS in Hot Springs. Obviously the *Stebbins* staff would not have even heard of their Arkansas cousins at the time this series began. With that thought in mind, it is incredible how closely the two series resemble each other.

According to Elizabeth McLeod, another similarity is that while *Lum and Abner* used the community of Waters, Arkansas, as the model for the fictitious Pine Ridge, *The Stebbins Boys* was set in mythical Bucksport Point, Maine, which was largely based on the town of Northeast Harbor. Not coincidentally, this happened to be the home town of Parker Fennelly, who played the role of Esley Stebbins (and would later become better known as Titus Moody of *The Fred Allen Show*). Arthur Allen was heard as brother and partner John Stebbins. As the December 21 script opens, we are apparently in the middle of a storyline involving the Stebbins brothers taking care of a 13-year-old orphan (no, her

name is not Ellie Connors). Let's take just the first page of that particular script, and in reading this, see if you can hear Lum & Abner's voices:

ANNOUNCER: *Monday again at Bucksport Point. As we tune in on the general store, John and Esley are in the midst of a very important discussion—*

JOHN: *Wal, 'pears to me, since she's a girl, a doll is the right thing fer us to git her fer Christmas.*

ESLEY: *But, John, she don't play with dolls.*

JOHN: *Like as not she would if she had any to play with.*

ESLEY: *What she likes is saucepans an' brooms, as fer as I kin make out.*

JOHN: *Yes, I never see sich a hand fer work as that child. Mebbe if she had a doll er sich like to play with, we could persuade her to quit workin' fer a little while an' play some. I don't like the way she jes' works all the time. All work an' no play makes Jack a dull boy, an' I figger that works fer girls as well as fer boys.*

ESLEY: *Wal, I say, give folks what they want, an' when we was askin' her last night—sort o' hintin' 'round as ye might say—she never said nothin' 'bout dolls er no sich truck, but all she could think of was that she needed a new fryin' pan, an' ye know she did say that it'd be nice to have some new curtains in the kitchen.*

JOHN: *There ye are makin' more work fer the child—ye'll wear her out afore ye're though.*

Okay, let's face it... people in other parts of the country frequently find Lum and Abner's Arkansas dialect difficult to understand, but sometimes the Stebbins dialogue

(which is based on the rural dialect of Maine and other New England states) has peculiarities that sound foreign to the rest of us. For example, to mean "I suppose" or "I think," Lum and Abner would usually say "I reckon." In the above-quoted excerpt, John Stebbins used the second most common term, "I figger," but in most of the scripts both characters use a phrase spelled as "I cal'ate." This is undoubtedly a contraction for "calculate," but it is so archaic that no one, even natives of Maine, know how it would have been used in a natural way. You reckon "I figger" will ever go out of style?

Back to the story... John and Esley have a lengthy discussion about how to get their young ward, Sarah Browning, to learn how to play instead of doing housework all the time. We learn how the two old geezers came to be associated with the girl by the following lines:



Now **WHY** do these faces look so familiar?
Arthur Allen and Parker Fennelly as
the Stebbins Boys.

JOHN: Ol' Cap'n Browning app'inted us Sarah's gardeens an' we ain't goin' to go back on the old man now that he's dead an' gone, an' we ain't goin' to go back on little Sarah. No, sir, not if I have to git down an' start dressin' dolls—a'skippin' rope—er playin' jacks.

ESLEY: Sounds like ye've mapped out a purty stren'ous winter fer yerself.

John's attempt to learn to skip rope, so he can teach the diversion to Sarah, ends Lum-style, with the old fellow flat on the floor amid the crushed pickle barrel:

JOHN: Wal, I cal'ate ye can't teach an old dog new tricks, Esley. I started too late. When I come to jump, my knees jes' give way under me, an' the next thing I knowed I was lyin' face down among the gerkins.

In the midst of all this hilarity, another character enters the store. This is Hobbie B. Stevens, Esq., and just by reading this exchange, can you guess which L&A character he corresponds to?

ESLEY: What's he comin' 'round here fer?

JOHN: Wal, never mind. Keep a civil tongue to the man.

HOBBLE: Any mail fer me, boys?

ESLEY: (snappily) Evenin' mail hasn't come up yit. Good evenin'—close the door when ye go out.

HOBBLE: Wal now, Esley, I dunno why ye keep pickin' on me like this. I come up friendlylike, not carryin' no chip on my shoulder...

ESLEY: I said shut the door when ye go out!

JOHN: Now, Esley, lookee here—Hobbie ain't done nothin' to provoke ye, an' I don't see why ye're goin' off the handle at him like this.

HOBBLE: That's right, John, I want to be friends...

This exchange with "Squire Hobbie" goes on until the old chiseler brings up the fact that he is proud that his uncle, Cap'n Browning, left little Sarah in their care:

HOBBLE: What I'm referrin' to particularly is how ye've took in little Sarah Browning.

ESLEY: Yes, after you tried yer best to git yer hands on her on account of her property.

HOBBLE: Ye're misjedgin' me, Esley—I don't want nothin' 'cept what's good fer the child an' her best upbringing'. I admit she's got six thousand dollars—mebbe a little more with the interest that's accruin' in the bank—

Within a few minutes, Hobbie has opined that Sarah needs to get out of the house and get away from work more often, just as John and Esley were discussin'. He volunteers to take Sarah over to the "Grange supper" for the evening, and John agrees (over Esley's objections). After Hobbie gets Sarah out the door, the show ends this way:

HOBBLE: I'll tell you something now: Here's a paper fer ye to read—Goodnight! (Door)

JOHN: Why—

ESLEY: Wal, what is it? What is it?

JOHN: It's—a legal paper—takin' her away from us an' givin' her to Hobbie.

ESLEY: Huh?

JOHN: He's tricked us!

ESLEY: Quick! Stop 'em! You fool, you let her git out of here—

(Bursting ad lib—fadeout)

After that not-unexpected development (at least for those who know Squire Skimp), the next day's program begins with the Stebbins brothers fretting about Sarah's fate. They have enlisted the help of local lawyer Squire Briggs, who appears to be this show's parallel to Dick Huddleston. Briggs has bad news: Cap'n Browning's will does appoint the Stebbins brothers as Sarah's guardians, but it turns out that the Stebbinses had previously loaned money to the captain, so Hobbie Stevens' claim is that the two storekeepers "unduly influenced" Browning to name them in his will.

JOHN: Wal, this law is a funny thing—sometimes it says "yes" an' sometimes "no"—all at one an' the same time—it's too much fer me. Guess I'll stick to the Good Book.

BRIGGS: I guess most of us would get along better with more o' the Good Book an' less o' the law, though it might go a little hard on us lawyers.

Squire Briggs suggests that since John and Esley have little chance of winning the case anyway, they just let Hobbie Stevens have the girl since he is her cousin. Reluctantly, the two brothers agree and the lawyer leaves. They realize that they must put Sarah out of their minds, and begin to get their dinner together... then they spy Sarah's shoes and apron that she left when Hobbie absconded with her:

ESLEY: Jes' as she left 'em.

JOHN: She might be in the kitchen right now, gittin' our supper fer us, 'stead of us bein' alone. Esley—The law may be agin us, but, by golly, that don't make no diff'rence—I ain't goin' to give her up, I ain't.

ESLEY: An' neither be I!

JOHN: We'll fight it if it takes the last cent we got in the world.

ESLEY: An' we'll keep fightin' till we git her back!

At the opening of the December 23 script, John is using the party line to get Alviry, the unheard phone operator, to try to reach Squire Briggs to inform him of

their decision to fight the case... and they are determined to have her back by Christmas, which is only two days away. Briggs says they will be lucky if they have her back by a year from Christmas. In the middle of all this discussion, the mail carrier Lem (Edwards?) comes in and John and Esley give him free candy canes for all his children. (It looks like small town store owners are kindhearted all across radio-land.) It doesn't help the brothers' feelings any when most of the mail turns out to be the toys each of them ordered to give Sarah for Christmas. This makes them feel worse than ever, as customer Virginia L. Pennypacker (sounds like a Stan Freberg character) enters. Virginia reasons that just because Sarah isn't living with the brothers there is no reason they can't still give her their gifts. The script ends on an upbeat note, as the three of them plan a grand Christmas party at Virginia's house.

Christmas Eve 1931 was undoubtedly a rather dark time for many people mired in the depths of the Great Depression, but on that day's episode we find John and Esley joyfully wrapping Sarah's presents... although as it turns out, the two of them each bought her the same thing, so she will be getting an awful lot of identical pairs of toys. One of their funniest (and most L&A-esque) scenes comes when they unpack the Santa Claus costume they ordered and argue over which one of them is going to play



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Esley Stebbins' Santy Claus suit may have been the same as this one advertised in the 1933 Sears Christmas catalog.

train drags.

ESLEY: I can pad it out with a few pillows—Santy's allus fat an' jolly.

JOHN: If ye git surrounded by enough pillows to fit that costume, ye won't feel very jolly—fact is, ye'll smother to death.

ESLEY: I'm goin' to try on the whiskers. Now—how's that—how does it look now?

JOHN: Ye look like the bearded lady at the circus with that red skirt draggin' on the ground.

ESLEY: Pshaw now, John, git serious. We've got a job on our hands. Think of how pleased little Sarah is goin' to be when I come in!

JOHN: Mebbe she'll jump through the window in fright—you look more like one o' them hop-goblins ye read about than Santy Claus.

ESLEY: I know what's the trouble—I ain't got the cap on.

JOHN: Wal, here ye be. Goodbye, Esley.

ESLEY: Why do ye say goodbye?

JOHN: I jes' noticed the size of it. When ye git that thing on, I ain't goin' to be able to see ye at all.

While they are struggling with the Santa suit, Virginia Pennypacker comes in with the alarming news that Sarah is not at Hobble Stevens' house. The old miser has sent her to the County Farm for safekeeping, as she keeps trying to run away from him. John and Esley hope that this action by Hobble will be the thing that assists them in getting Sarah's guardianship back, but as the script ends, John is on the phone with Squire Briggs and making little progress.

On Friday, Christmas Day, the two brothers are feelin' mighty low:

ESLEY: John, how do ye think a man like Hobble feels walkin' around on Christmas day, knowin' what he's done?

JOHN: Esley, the sad thing is that them reptiles don't seem to have no feelin's. Probably he feels that he's all aglow an' happy

the jolly old elf:

JOHN: All right, I ain't goin' to argue with ye. Git into the costume—let's see how it fits ye.

ESLEY: Wal, gi' me a chance to git my coat off.

JOHN: Which one o' these is the coat an' which is the pants?

ESLEY: I don't know—figger it out fer yerself—come on—

JOHN: Wal, I figger mebbe this is the coat. Slide into it.

ESLEY: It's a mite long, ain't it?

JOHN: Ye sure that wa'n't the costume meant fer Mrs. Santy Claus?

ESLEY: What'd ye mean?

JOHN: The thing looks like a skirt to me the way it trails on the ground.

ESLEY: It was sold to me fer Santy Claus.

JOHN: Wal, I guess even Mrs. Santy Claus wouldn't wear her skirts down that long this year. Walk around—let's see how yer

'cause he's beat us out o' somethin' he knows means more to us than anything in the world.

ESLEY: Funny how some folks git pleasure out o' bein' cussed. I wonder why they let sich critters live?

JOHN: Wal, it's the old problem o' the mosquito—but mebbe the Lord has some use fer him—if only to keep a man active at night an' give him a little exercise. I s'pose the mosquito is one o' the Lord's songbirds.

ESLEY: But Hobble can't even sing.

John and Esley are a couple of nervous Nellies because they haven't heard from Squire Briggs all day and they cannot reach him on the phone. Virginia Pennypacker arrives and invites the brothers to Christmas dinner at her house, though they feel little like celebrating. With her usual logic, she suggests that they all go over to the County Farm to visit Sarah and all the other kids:

VIRGINIA: You're taxpayers and it's a public institution, and they can't keep you out.

ESLEY: An' by golly, I kin wear my Santy Claus costume!

JOHN: Then they'll be sure to keep us out.

VIRGINIA: Now, John, really—there's no reason why Esley can't dress up and give the little children down there a happy Christmas.

ESLEY: We'll take all that forty cent candy!

JOHN: Yes, sir, an' all the gim-cracks we kin pick up. By golly, I feel better. Esley, the trouble with us is we ain't got steamed up with the Christmas spirit. We been thinkin' so hard of our own troubles we ain't thought of other folks.

ESLEY: That's jes' the thing! We'll feel a heap better if we go an' do something fer others 'stead o' settin' here a'whinin' an' grindin' 'bout Hobble.

Virginia calls the County Farm to okay the visit, and receives the shocking news that Sarah Browning is no longer there.. a stranger took her away. Just as the Stebbins brothers are ready to organize a lynch mob for Hobble Stevens, in comes Squire Briggs with young Sarah in tow.

BRIGGS: Merry Christmas, boys! I've got her back for ye.

VIRGINIA: How did you do it?

BRIGGS: Well, I worked on the Judge's sympathy, and I showed him Hobble had overstepped his authority in placing Sarah in the County Farm—so here she is safe and sound—and I wish you all a very Merry Christmas!

ALL: And a very Merry Christmas to you, Squire!

(Ad lib—fadeout)

So at least our existing Stebbins Boys scripts end on an upbeat note. If the rest of the series was as much like Lum and Abner as these examples, however, it is a safe bet that their troubles with Sarah and Hobble were not over by a long shot. We hope you have enjoyed this peek into the alternate L&A world of The Stebbins Boys, and that you have just as merry a Christmas as those loveable old characters from the hill country and the Maine coast!

- Tim Hollis

Sears also sold a toy grocery store, so early 1930s kids could pretend they were Lum & Abner, Eb & Zeb, or the Stebbins Boys!

