

Beyond Kansas City:
The Texas Rangers and *Life on Red Horse Ranch*
Ryan Ellett

Originally published in The Old Radio Times, May-June 2011.

The Texas Rangers were formed in the early 1930s by Arthur B. Church, the hands-on owner of Kansas City's KMBC, the city's CBS affiliate. The Texas Rangers was an eight-piece band that specialized in cowboy and western music, though they were not adverse to mixing gospel, traditional, and other miscellaneous tunes into their repertoire. The Rangers were actually two quartets, one of singers and the other of musicians. The exact membership of the group during the earliest days is a bit hazy, but all the performers were KMBC staff musicians who were tasked with creating a western outfit. This assignment came though none of the them actually had any notable background in western or cowboy music. The most authentic of the Rangers troupe was Texas-born singer-songwriter "Tex" Owens (Doie Hensley by birth), the Original Texas Ranger. Owens, an employee of KMBC for most of the 1930s, was, interestingly, never an official member of the band even though he performed with them regularly.

Even though the Texas Rangers were picked up by CBS's coast-to-coast network as early as November 1, 1932, the band was primarily a regional act based out of Kansas City which performed both on KMBC radio and in concert in the surrounding counties. It's not known exactly when the band appeared in its first musical drama show, *Flying Horse Ranch*, but it was likely in 1933 or 1934. The characters played by the band members were in place when the Rangers arrived in Chicago in August, 1934, to record at the World Broadcasting studios. On August 27, 1934, the full eight-piece band, along with Owens providing additional vocals, recorded two sides, "Dude Ranch Party" Pt. 1 and 2. The next day Owens recorded four solo tracks; his signature "Cattle Call" (later popularized by Eddy Arnold), "Two Sweethearts," "Rocking Alone in an Old Rocking Chair," and "Pride of the Prairie".

Radio transcription series were a potentially lucrative source of income for the right talent and Arthur Church was sure his Texas Rangers fit the bill. Freeman Correll and Charles Gosden had popularized the concept of radio transcription, the business of recording a program to rent or sell to interested stations, with their blockbuster *Amos 'n' Andy* show in the late 1920s. During the early 1930s several transcription companies sprang up offering new material to radio stations. The *Air Adventures of Jimmy Allen*, *Chandu, the Magician*, *Tarzan*, and *Cecil and Sally* were just a few series which achieved a considerable degree of popularity via various transcription services. By the middle of the decade four companies, the C. P. MacGregor Service, the RCA/NBC Thesaurus Library, the Standard Radio Library, and the World Broadcasting Service, had the most market share with their contracts with 350 stations nationwide.

Gomer Cool, a Missouri native who received some formal training on the violin at the Kansas City Horner-

Conservatory under the eye of Danish-born composer Sir Carl Busch, began working at KMBC in 1929. He was called upon by Church to write a set of scripts which aired as *Flying Horse Ranch*. Finding the broadcasts successful on local radio, Church began planning to use the series to vault his Texas Rangers to greater fame via syndication efforts. The scripts were not ground-breaking in any way. They related the continuing story of a group of ranch hands on the Flying Horse Ranch who are called on to save their beloved ranch from the nefarious schemer Steve Bradford who would take control of it if given the chance. More important than Cool's story was the music of the Texas Rangers. There were three to five songs per fifteen-minute episode, each performed by the Texas Rangers, Tex Owens, or both. These nine musicians all took dramatic parts in the program in addition to their playing.

How much time passed between the airing of *Flying Horse Ranch* and when advertising agency J. Stirling Getchell, Inc. expressed interest in the program is not yet known. Neither is it known exactly how such a small radio series came to the attention of Getchell's New York agency. Regardless, Getchell was made aware of Church's series and decided it would be a good vehicle to promote the Socony-Vacuum Oil Company. Getting the attention of such an up-and-coming ad company was a real coup for Church. Getchell's agency had earned its first major account just three years earlier in 1932 when they were given the chance to promote Chrysler's new model, the Plymouth. After sales took off other notable companies came knocking, including the then-second largest oil company Socony-Vacuum (later Mobiloil, now part of ExxonMobil).

Contracts between the two parties were signed on March 30 and Cool's *Flying Horse Ranch*, now renamed *The Red Horse Ranch* (officially dubbed *Life on the Red Horse Ranch* but rarely referred to by the entire name) in honor of Socony's famous red horse logo, had the financial backing to get recorded. The contract indicates a dozen KMBC employees were signed for the project: Gomer Cool, Doie Henlasey (Tex) Owens, Duane Swalley, Edward Cronenbold, Roderick May, Robert Crawford, Ruth Barth, John Preston, Paul Sells, Herbert Kratoska (frequently referred to as "Herbie"), Eddie Edwards, and Marion Fonville (misspelled "Folville" on the contract and "Fondville" in a newspaper review). A photo taken in Chicago hints at fourteen players, however. One of the extra two has been confirmed as Clarence Hartman who began performing in the band around this time.

Though no information survives indicating which parts each cast member played, most of them can be surmised without much trouble. Robert Crawford likely played "Bob" for the obvious reason he generally went by that name and similarly, "Tex" was surely played by "Tex" Owens. As the only female in the cast, Rose Carter would have been played by Ruth Barth. Texas Rangers historian Kevin Coffey has identified Marion Fonville as "Alabam." Fonville was an announcer which would make him a prime candidate for the series announcer as well. Gomer Cool is identified in various documentation as "Tenderfoot" and Edward Cronenbold is documented as "Tuscon." Herbert Kratoska played Arizona,

Hartman portrayed "Idaho," and Sells was "Monty." The other three primary characters, Cheyenne, Sam Carter, and Cookie, have not yet been positively identified with the other known actors.

The *Red Horse Ranch* contract called for KMBC to produce and record no less than twenty-six episodes, each of which would have 90 seconds of space at the beginning and end for a commercial message. The station had to cover all production costs but retained all rights to the show, allowing them to market it further when the partnership with Socony-Vacuum Oil ended. This initial order of 26 episodes was to be recorded by April 15, 1935, so they could then be sent out to anywhere within the territory being targeted by J. Stirling Getchell for Socony's Lubrite product.

The advertising agency was required to run at least two episodes per week, thus the 26 shows would fill a thirteen-week block, a common broadcasting schedule at the time. The contract indicates a full year's worth of episodes (104) was to be produced though there is no indication so many were ever made. *Variety* magazine reported in the summer of 1935 that the Texas Rangers had finished recording 39 additional episodes of *Life on Red Horse Ranch*. This matches the sixty-five scripts which exist in the station's archives, of which only the first 26 World broadcast recordings are circulating so far in the old time radio community. An additional 38 episodes are believed to exist in private collections, thus accounting for 64 of the 65 recorded. Beyond the original 65 broadcasts two additional undated scripts numbered 97 and 100 exist but there are no clues as to whether the contents were ever aired.

Recording on *Red Horse Ranch* began Tuesday, April 2, at the World Broadcasting studios in Chicago where the Texas Rangers had cut two sides back in August, 1934. The first 26 episodes were all cut in four days with each actor earning fifty dollars per day for their work. World Broadcasting Systems was a major player in the burgeoning radio transcription market, recording both music and dramatic radio fare, and Church was wise to associate his product with the company.

While in Chicago the Rangers did an extra three hours of recording at the Decca Record Studios earning themselves another twenty dollars. On April 6 they laid down eight tracks on a Saturday afternoon. The songs were: "Goin' Down to the Santa Fe," "Prairie Dreamboat," "Careless Love," "Let the Rest of the World Go By," "New River Train," "Lonesome Valley Sally," "The Big Corral," and "Trail to Mexico." Immediately following this session a band called the Happy Hollow Hoodlums with exactly the same instruments (fiddle, accordeon, guitar, and banjo) recorded three songs, "Down Home Rag," "Panama," and a promotional recording for Julian Kohange Company, a shoe store. That KMBC had a long-running program rural comedy program called *Happy Hollow* leads to the easy theory that the Hoodlums were the Texas Rangers. These recordings were instrumentals with no vocals, but why the musicians would record under this alternate moniker is not explained by company documents.

Red Horse Ranch was not the commercial breakthrough that Church hoped. The program did reach a respectable

number of radio markets, including some of the largest in the Midwest. It was aired on WGN (Chicago), WWJ (Detroit, some sources claim legendary station WXYZ), WHK (Cleveland) and WCCO (Minneapolis). Smaller markets included some in Illinois (WTAD, Quincy, WJBL, Decatur, WDZ, Tuscola, and WEBQ, Harrisburg), Iowa (WOC, Davenport, and WHO, Des Moines), Indiana (WFBM, Indianapolis, WKVB, Richmond, WHBU, Anderson, WBOW, Terre Haute, and WLBC, Muncie), Missouri (KMOX, St. Louis, and KFRU, Columbia), Colorado (KGIW, Alamosa, KLZ, Denver, KFXJ, Grand Junction, and KIDW, Lamar), South Dakota (KABN, Aberdeen, and KGFX, Pierre), Wyoming (KDFN, Casper, and KWYO, Sheridan), Kansas (KGNO, Dodge City, KFH, Wichita, and WIBW, Topeka), Montana (KGIR, Butte, KFBB, Great Falls, and KGCX, Wolf Point), Nebraska (KMMJ, Clay Center, KFOR, Lincoln, WOW, Omaha, and KGKY, Scottsbluff), and North Dakota (WDAY, Fargo, and KLPM, Minot).

Indeed, there is little that makes *Life on the Red Horse Ranch* stand out to modern listeners. The ranch hands are, for the most part, indistinguishable from each other and the characters are pretty much stock characters for western fare. Sam Carter is the noble ranch owner, trying to scratch out an honest living in a tough business. Rose Carter, Sam's daughter, is a kind-hearted gal who wins the heart of all the boys, especially Alabam. Cookie, the African American cook, displays dim-witted buffoonery typical of many radio black-face characters of the time. Steve Bradford, the bad guy trying to take ownership of the Red Horse, blends with countless such characters from western radio, television, and film. The cowboy drawl is not convincing and the minimal use of sound affects blunts some of the scenes. Nevertheless, numerous contemporary old time radio listeners have found the series perfectly listenable and even entertaining, if not on the level of the era's most beloved programs. What *Red Horse Ranch* lacks in story and acting quality is more than made up for by the polished sound of the Texas Rangers.

Life on Red Horse Ranch was broadcast in the markets mentioned above over a period of about two years before interest waned. Still, KMBC received enough requests for information on the series in succeeding years that Cool felt compelled to write an internal memo in 1939 addressing the status of the series. It was, as the recordings suggest and as Cool himself professed, not an action show. The episodes were built around dialog and songs, and the few action sequences were, with only bare-bones sound effects, stilted and undramatic. Cool even showed flashes of irritation to those within the company who continued to try and sell the series as a competitor to such classics as *The Lone Ranger*. The program was intended to spotlight the music of the Texas Rangers; sustained action was not doable when a quarter-hour broadcast featured four songs ("no more, no less," though that was not always the case). In fact, to market the show as an action program was dishonest and sure to disappoint any buyer in a short period of time.

Outside of the nature of the show, Cool warned of the physical state of the now-four-year-old World pressings. KMBC actually had few quality records to share with potential buyers, with most of the best sounding examples stored in

Chicago and New York. Listening to the copies on hand in Kansas City was “not [his] idea of how to get the show sold.” Cool was – not to be cheeky – cool to the program at that point. He warned KMBC sales staff to “be pretty careful about what shows” they auditioned to potential clients since the sound quality for some of them could only be described as “pretty terrible”

Cool may have had other reasons for downplaying the saleability of *Red Horse Ranch*, however. By the end of the 1930s the Texas Rangers had received considerable time on CBS' nationwide network and he was regularly pitching script ideas to networks and sponsors for new Rangers programs. Plus, the motion picture industry was getting some attention from Church. The last thing they would have wanted was for some early recordings with less than stellar acting performances in less-than-desirable sound to begin circulating and leave a poor impression on possible financial suitors.

Ultimately, Church pulled the plug on *Red Horse Ranch* by the end of the decade. In addition to the problems outlined by Cool, copyright issues with some of the songs performed by the band created headaches. With film, radio, and recording opportunities before the Rangers, *Red Horse Ranch* was shelved permanently before World War II broke out.

The first 26 episodes of *Life on Red Horse Ranch* were acquired by Randy Riddle in recent months and are now being made available in a distribution by the Old Time Radio Researchers. Hopefully most, if not all, the rest of the series' 65 episodes will be added to the group's holdings and offered to old time radio fans as a reintroduction to a 75-year-old-series, the creative work of Arthur Church, and the music of the Texas Rangers.





WORLD BROADCASTING SYSTEM, INC.



RED HORSE RANCH

(Featuring KMBC Texas Rangers)

Program Number

Reproduce at— $33\frac{1}{3}$ r. p. m.
LATERAL CUT

Produced by

SOUND STUDIOS OF NEW YORK, Inc.
50 West 57th Street, New York, N. Y.

under *Western Electric Company* License

This disc is and remains the property
of World Broadcasting
System, Inc.