

The Script Library: Radio Drama on a Budget
Ryan Ellett

Originally published in The Old Radio Times, November-December 2014.

Most fans of old time radio are knowledgeable about the business of transcribed radio programs, at least at a general conversational level. Sparked by Charles Correll and Freeman Gosden who saw the potential for considerable financial gain by selling their *Amos 'n' Andy* program to non-NBC network stations, transcription services were common from the 1930s on. World Transcription Service and C. P. MacGregor are two more widely remembered transcription services, though there were numerous others. In the latter years of the dramatic radio era, as network resistance to pre-recorded material dissolved, Ziv became a major player in the transcription market before moving into television.

What has not received as much attention in the old time radio literature are the numerous script libraries which co-existed with transcription library providers. There were any number of companies, some large and some small, which sold scripts to stations which would then be produced using their local staff members. Among these script library providers were Radio Centre Limited (Ontario, Canada), Radio Features (Washington, D.C.), Radio Features of America (New York), Radio House, Inc. (New York), and Radio Programme Producers (Montreal, Canada). Not all such libraries were for-profit ventures. The Works Progress Administration's Federal Radio Educational Project had such a library, headed by William Dow Boutwell, which offered scripts to educators and stations.

One such script library was owned by Radio Events, Inc., a company run by Joseph Koehler and Georgia Backus, the latter of whom is remembered for her supporting roles in films (notably *Citizen Kane*) and a number of radio series. Radio Events provided a number of radio-related services and on May 1, 1937, because of the company's growth it split off its script library service into a separate subsidiary named, simply, The Script Library. While Koehler and Backus remained with Radio Events, Inc., as president and chairman of the board respectively, The Script Library was headed by Genevieve Pace as station contact secretary and Marie L. Braun as business manager.

At the time of the corporate split The Script Library had 112 writers in its stable. Among those writers were: Joseph Alexander (Backus' husband), Gladys Allen, Marvin Angier, Margot Beaton, Heywood Broun, Ronald Dawson (production and continuity chief at WCHS, Charleston, WV, and writer for The Script Library for at least ten years), Raymond Dumont, John Fleming, John F. Gantt, Jael Garrison, Carl Glick, Leon Goldstein, Lloyd Graham, Claire Griffin, Virginia Gunn, Mary Hatch, Ben Hawthorne (grandson of Nathaniel Hawthorne), Bob Jellison, E. B. Jenkins, Lawrence Menkin, Leslie Morrison, Edwin (Edward) H. Morse, Marjorie Mueller, Wayne Pool, Edward Goldsmith Reilly, C. E. Risse, J. O. Simon, Martin Smith, Donal Spatz, Alfred Vogt, Willard Wallace, Alice Ward, Emory Ward, Fred L. Webber, Muir Whittall, Eugenia Whyte, Marjorie Williams, and Karl Zomar.

Many of the writers lived in smaller areas away from the major broadcasting centers and often they were connected with local radio stations. When submitted

scripts were accepted by The Script Library sales were split 50-50 with the authors and royalty checks then sent out monthly. The company targeted primarily smaller stations which did not have the resources to write their own material, though they also sold material to small theater groups who supplemented their live performances with radio broadcasts. Prices for script rights ranged from \$3 for a half hour serial episode, to \$5 for a week's worth of quarter-hour serial episodes, to less than \$1 for a short one-to-five minute filler script. Prices could also vary depending on the renown of the author; for instance, they charged \$500 for a script written by Lord Dunsany. As an incentive for their more prominent writers, The Script Library began selling some scripts only if stations agreed to run the author's name in a broadcast byline. Stations received six-month rights to use of the script and could reuse it as many times as they wished.

The Script Library's fees were in line with those of competitors. Sam Stiefel Enterprises, which also handled musical and acting talent, offered scripts for \$0.50 to \$2.00, ranging from 3 ½ minutes to a full half-hour. Their pricing structure did not differ whether the scripts were used in a sustaining or sponsored timeslot. Unlike The Script Library, Stiefel's writers, who included Fanny May Baldrige, Al Bernard, James Lyons, and Henla Perfit, also received a flat salary in addition to a percentage of sales.

Few of the series created by Script Library authors are familiar to old time radio fans today; perhaps only *The Answer Man* survives in any sort of recorded form. This makes sense considering the primary market was small stations which had little financial incentive or technical capability to record their own material. The Script Library released scripts in seasonal batches to suit changing weather and moods. In promotional material their summer scripts were described as "light in character" featuring small casts and inexpensive production requirements, benefits ascribed to all their series.

Three of their summer, 1937, series were *Oh Jenkins*, a comedy, *Murder in the 400*, a mystery, and *Love Is A Word*, a romance. All were 26-episode runs priced at \$25 each. These weekly series were complemented by an "across the boards" serial for stations wanting a six-times-per-week program. Entitled *The Road to Nowhere*, the show required only two actors who played Guy and Sadie, a British intelligence officer and a Broadway chorus girl who meet and find trouble in India. *The Road to Nowhere* was one of the company's specialties, so-called "twosomes" which only required two actors.

Other Script Library series tackled more high brow literature such as Dickens' *David Copperfield* by Jay Clark, *Royal Romances* by Richard Osgood, Ibsen's *Doll's House* adapted by Ronald Dawson, and Nathaniel Hawthorne's *Scarlet Letter* written by his grandson Ben Hawthorne.

The Script Library was servicing over 300 stations by 1937 and that year they upped their promotional output. First, they released a 96-page catalog edited and compiled by Georgia Backus and Julienne Dupuy of their scripts to station and production officials (but not agencies due to printing costs). Then staff began sending out "Trends and a Few Opinions," a multi-page newsletter which predicted programming trends and offered promotional ideas to stations as well as commercial information about overseas radio. Further, The Script Library began

marketing more heavily to small theater groups with the thought that they would be good sources to develop acting, writing, and directing talent for radio.

Executives for the script service found more markets abroad, notably in Australia and Central and South America, but also in Europe. They had a foothold in Australia by 1937 when they took over direct distribution of their own scripts, replacing former distributor J. B. Chandler & Co. In Central and South America the company was represented by the Melchor Guzman Co., an organization that specialized in representing foreign radio stations. The company both translated the American programs and created appropriate foreign language promotional materials. One of the first series to find a foreign market this way was *Gods of Banghah*, written for print by Achmid Baroudi and adapted for radio by John Fleming. XEQ in Mexico City purchased the series for a 13-week run. Recognizing that their listeners were not familiar with American-style radio drama, the station began interspersing short dramatic pieces in between their musical broadcasts. The station slowly increased the length of these dramatic interludes to "educate listeners to spoken programs.

Orders from stations in Holland, Switzerland and Palestine showed a preference for mysteries and thrillers, and Puerto Rico's WKAQ in San Juan ordered the mystery *Murder in 400*. A different translation service, National Export Adv. in New York, ensured Spanish listeners would appreciate the serial.

In a sign that the company believed in regular turnover of scripts to ensure a fresh product for stations, the Library sold over 3,000 scripts to Michigan State. Ostensibly the scripts were sold for the benefit of radio students who could use them to prepare for careers in broadcasting. More likely, the Library weeded out dated scripts which no longer offered a reasonable prospect of bringing in money and unloaded them. Under terms of the sale the university was still obligated to pay author royalties if the scripts were ever aired over a commercial station.

Some of The Script Library's most popular offerings in the early 1940s were *First Person Plural*, *Crime Quiz*, and *So You Think You Know Fashion*. *First Person Plural* had an unusual format; the weekly show was split into two 15-minute broadcasts. The first quarter-hour featured the actors introducing themselves to the audience before whom they would be performing during the second quarter hour. Stations which purchased this series included WTIC, KGLO, WMAS, WESX, KOIN, WWSW, WCHS, WOW, WRJN, KFRC, KFOX, WRUF.

So You Think You Know Fashion by Marjorie Mueller and *Crime Quiz* by John Henry (former manager of the Central States Broadcasting System) were complementary shows; The first was geared to female listeners while the second to male listeners. Each was sold separately, however. In mid-1940 purchasers of *Crime Quiz* included KFIZ, WDWS, WLAK, WFBM, WCAX, KCKN, KDLR, WMAN, KPAB, KGGM, WHOP, KFWB, KUTA, KPMC, KSOO, WMOB, KRBM, WQDM, WHLS, WBTM, WHBQ, WQAN, WIND, KSFO, WBNS, WTMJ, WGBI, KFXM, WHBL, WNBC, WJBC, KRGV, KYW, WRC, KDB, WKOK, KCMO, KHBC, WTAD, PRD2 (Rio de Janeiro), and several Canadian stations, CHNS, CHSJ, CFRB, CFRN, CFCN, CKOV, and CHRC. In total the series scripts were ordered by at least 111 stations.

The company continued to add variety to their script offerings. *Nocturne* was written by Georgia Backus who in mid-1940 resigned from her position as dramatic

director at CBS. *Family Almanac* scripts were purchased by at least 138 stations, including KROC, Rochester, MN. As a change of pace from their fifteen- and thirty-minute programs, The Script Library added stand-alone scripts including a pair of hour-long Christmas broadcasts as well as two half-hour scripts, *Voodoo* and *Silver Mist*. Their writers created two hour-long series, *Your Variety Show* and *Your Minstrel Show* and three new half-hour series, *Supernaturally Speaking*, *Future Formulas*, and *Nick Silvo, Newspaperman*. Additional quarter-hour series introduced in the early 1940s were *Payoffs* and *Slanguage*. *The Answer Man*, mentioned above, was written by Gloyd Thrailkill, the continuity editor at KWTQ, Springfield, MO before she moved to KMMJ, Grand Island, NE, for a similar position.

In an unusual move The Script Library released three scripts with patriotic themes in celebration of the Fourth of July in 1940 for free to any stations which could not afford the regular purchase fee. That same month The Script Library celebrated the broadcast of its 200,000th script. That milestone script was *San Juan City* written by Miranda Azin and it was aired over Missoula, MT's KGVO. It had taken The Script Library just over eight years to reach that point, recognizing their first script broadcast on June 22, 1932, over the Yankee Network.

Patriotic themes became more popular as World War II expanded overseas and the United States entered in 1941. Writing to industry insiders, Joseph Koehler noted just a few months after America's entry in the war that The Script Library's biggest demand from stations was for scripts which were heavy on plot with less focus on character development. Stations also clamored for patriotic material, thought not scripts which spent too much time on "the horrors of war" nor anything that had even the slightest pacifist message. Demand for "romantic twaddle" was almost nonexistent. The company also made moves into sports coverage, inking a deal with Dunkel Sports Research Service, Inc., to distribute the Service's information in a program format that stations could use to find local sponsors.

In 1938 The Script Library made an exploratory step into the infant television industry. They briefly started selling scripts for television even though there was not yet an indication of a market for such a product. The offerings were partially to allow executives to begin studying the logistics of producing for the medium and actors for performing over it. Had television development not been delayed by the onset of World War II the company may have had a profitable hand in the new industry. However, by the time television began to take off in the late 1940s and early 1950s, The Script Library had apparently passed from the commercial scene.

Unless business records for The Script Library are uncovered in the future, it seems likely that the venture will remain little more than a curiosity, one of the many side stories of radio's Golden Age. It's impossible to gauge the quality of their scripts since recordings are unknown except for *The Answer Man* and copies of other series have yet to be discovered. Considering the low budget market in which the scripts were circulated, there's little reason to think the average quality could approach that of the network programming with which fans of the era are so familiar. Further discoveries involving these script libraries, however, may open new pathways for individuals researching smaller stations and guide us to a fuller understanding of the material they broadcast on a regular basis