



Volume 34, Number 3

March, 2009

Little Orphan Annie

By Paul Barringer

Harold Gray was born on January 20, 1894, in Kankakee Illinois, making him a centenarian if he were still alive today. Gray passed away in 1968. I'm sure you are asking "who was Harold Gray, and what has he to do with O.T.R.?" Well, if you are not a reader, or a big fan of the comics, the name will mean nothing to you but it was very familiar to many Americans during the 1930's. His comic strip creation was read and adored by readers of all ages. His strip was the story of a little girl with curly red hair, oval blanks for eyes, and a dog named Sandy.

By now, you may have guessed the little curly haired waif was known as "Little Orphan Annie", not to be confused with "Orphan Ann" (who will be explained later in the article). Annie would become one of the most popular comic strip characters in the annals of the comic strip genre.

After having assisted Sidney Smith on the comic strip, "The Gumps", from 1921 to 1924, in 1924 Gray presented an idea for a new comic strip to Joseph M. Patterson of the Chicago Tribune Syndicate. If the name Patterson sounds familiar, I mentioned him previously in my article on Dick

Tracy, where he changed the title and name of Chester Gould's strip and character from "Plain Clothes Tracy" to "Dick Tracy", and changed Milton Caniff's character, "Tommy Tucker" to that of "Terry and the Pirates". He would also change Gray's character's name and the gender of Little Orphan Otto" to "Little Orphan Annie." The reasoning behind the change, Peterson said, was because there were too many comic strips dealing with boys already being done at that time. Gray would write and illustrate the Orphan Annie strip continuously for 45 years.

The comic strip started with Annie in an orphanage after being left on the doorstep. She eventually ran away and had to fend for herself for a time, but within a few weeks after the presentation of the strip, Annie would be taken under the wing of self-made millionaire Oliver Warbucks. For about a month in the strip, Annie kept calling her new father Mr. Warbucks until he told her never to, call him Mr. Warbucks again. She was told to call him "Daddy".

"Daddy" Warbucks would leave and come back into Annie's life in a continuing cycle throughout the strip's presentation. His absence in Annie's life and the strip was said to be due to his various business workings and his fighting battles around the world. This continuous

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2009 Convention Schedules

Cincinnati's 23rd Old Time Radio and Nostalgia Convention; April 24 – 25, 2009, Cincinnati North Hotel, Contact Bob Burchett, 10280 Gunpowder Rd., Florence, KY 41042 (888) 477-9112, haradio@hotmail.com

20th Annual Radio Classics Live! Sat; May 2, 2009, Buckley Performing Arts Center, Massasoit Community College, Brockton, MA. Contact Bob Bowers (508) 758-4865, bobowers@verizon.net or Alan Chapman (508) 459-1864, otrghost@gmail.com

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coming and going left Annie alone to make her own way in the world, which included encountering everything from ghosts, haunted houses and other supernatural phenomena, to fighting gangsters, revealing crooked politicians, and even fighting the Nazis during the war. She would associate with hobos and bums as she rode the rails on her many adventures during the strip's successful run. And, always, she would be involved in situations where she would inevitably fall into dangerous predicaments and exciting adventures.

Other major characters appearing in the comic strip included Sandy (Annie's dog), Joe Corntassel (The shy young boy who lived down the road from Annie), Mr. Am (A character who had supposedly lived millions of years), and Warbuck's two right-hand enforcers/executioners; the white-turbaned eight-foot giant, "Punjab", and the dark, silent, and mysterious "Asp". Both of whom, along with Warbucks would save Annie many times during the strip's run.

While writing and drawing the strip, Harold Gray had no qualms about injecting his political ideology and views into his comic strip, especially his All-American principle in business of "An honest day's pay for an honest day's work". Putting aside Gray's political views, it was his ability to tell a story, and keep his readers riveted with interest in the plot of the story, and make that reader unable to wait for the next day's strip, that made him an artist at story telling. In the strip, the character of Annie seemed to remain eternally twelve-years-old, so reminiscent of many other comic strip characters. Sandy was the only one in the comic strip that seemed to grow or age significantly.

It was seven years after the Little Orphan Annie strip was started that the feisty little redhead, Annie, made her debut on the airwaves on WGN Chicago. She would later show up in syndication on ABC.

In the 30's, the inability of the major networks to connect with each other from one coast to the other resulted in two Annie shows being presented on the radio. One program was broadcast in Chicago and one in San Francisco, so until about 1933 when the networks were finally able to make complete connections, it was essential to have two casts for the programs. Those in the East, and the Mid-West heard the part of Annie preformed by Shirley Bell and the audience on the Pacific Coast heard the voice of Floy Hughes as Annie. Since the scripts, were identical in concept and writing, each coast's presentation allowed the same things to happen on

the same day with different sounding people presenting the vocal aspects of the show.

Eventually the Chicago group took over the coast-to-coast presentation. Once the program was a coast-to-coast presentation, the cast of the radio program included: Shirley Bell as Annie, with Janice Gilbert in the role for the last two years of the syndicated program, also listed is Bobbe Dean who played Annie during a disagreement on Shirley Bell's contract in '34-'35. Allan Baruck was Joe Corntassel initially; later a teenaged Mel Torme would appear as Annie's friend Joe. Mr. Silo was voiced by Jerry O'Mera and Mrs. Silo was played by Henrietta Tedro, The part of Oliver "Daddy" Warbucks was performed by, Henry Saxe, Stanley Andrews and Boris Aplon. The Chinese cook, Aha, was the voice of Olan Soule. Pierre Andre was the announcer until he went to the Captain Midnight radio program as the announcer for that series.

Ovaltine sponsored the program from 1931 until 1940. Then, in 1941, Quaker Puffed Wheat Sparkies would assume sponsorship until the program's ending episode in 1942.

During the early run of the program, it was broadcast six-days-a-week from 5:45 -6:00 P.M. In the 1934 - 1935 season of the show the broadcast schedule was cut to five-days-a-week.

On the radio show, Annie was taken in by Mr. and Mrs. Silo who raised her in and around the town of Simmons Corners. As Annie grew older, (on the radio show) she would go globetrotting to many intriguing and unusual places. Later, "Daddy" Warbucks would be heard less often on the program, as Annie and the show departed from the comic strip format. Eventually, Annie's friend and buddy, Joe Corntassel, would be replaced by Captain Sparks, a combat pilot, during the World War II years. It was at this time that her adventures presented on the airways would take on settings of a more war-like aviation theme. Also, during this time the show's popularity slowly declined, in some part because of the American listening audience's non-acceptance of a little girl as the spokes-person leading the war effort. Additionally, some declining popularity could be associated with more new adventure shows being presented which caught the listeners' interest. The decline in Annie's popularity eventually led to the radio program leaving the air.

During the Ovaltine sponsored years when each episode was presented, listeners would hear the organ melody and words of the Orphan Annie song, as follows:

*"Who's that little chatter box?
The one with pretty Auburn locks,
Whom do you see?
It's Little Orphan Annie.
She and Sandy make a pair,
They never seem to have a care,
Cute little she,
This Little Orphan Annie
Bright eyes,
Cheeks a rosy glow,
There's a store of healthiness handy,
Mite size,
Always on the go,
If you want to know,
"Arf" says Sandy
Always wears a sunny smile,
Now wouldn't it be worth the while,
If you could be
Like Little Orphan Annie."*

This was followed by a slightly different introductions and openings by the announcer, such as, "Here it is 5:45 now, Orphan Annie time, and Ovaltine time again", among others. This would be followed by their pitch for Ovaltine, or one of their premium offers, and then followed with the story of Annie's adventures. These introductions, including the song, would last as long as 3 ½ minutes, or some even longer. This, in a fifteen minute program, which included another commercial presentation later in the show. But they always seemed to press so much action into those few minutes, that at times, it seemed longer than fifteen minutes, and at other times, it seemed like the program had just started minutes ago. In the later years, only the organ melody was heard by listeners, with no lyrics of the Annie song presented.



The Wander Company, makers of Ovaltine, would be a leader in promoting mail-in radio premiums, offering decoder pins, rings, magic transfer pictures, bracelets, manuals, masks, etc. The sponsors were pretty sly in their promotions of

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mail-in-premium offers of the decoder pins, by changing the alphabetical letter placement around the fixed outer circle of the decoder pin each year, which made the previous year's decoder useless in solving the secret messages delivered several times a week at the end of the episodes. Case in point, using the 1936 decoder pin and the secret message in the episode titled. "Mr. Flint is selling stock in the toll bridge", listeners are instructed to set their mystery radio code to the O-21 setting, with the following message to be decoded;

First word: 24-12-12-17-13
Second word: 14-17-6-17-26-6
Third word: 15-24-22-13-6
Fourth word: 13-4-1-21-20-17-19-4

resulting in this decoded message, "Annie visits Jakes emporium".

Had you used the previous year's (1935) decoder pin you would have this scrambled series of words, QUUNP, ANSNJS, MOKPS and PIDOYNLI. Likewise in the episode titled 'Mr. Silo prepares for a trip' the message to be decoded was from the mystery code setting, (Sometimes called the special code setting), L-17, with the following numbers as the message;

First word: 4-18-18-23-19
Second word: 4-18-14
Third word: 21-1-19
Fourth word: 5-1-23-18-5
Fifth word: 4-17-12-1

The decoded message reads, "Annie and Joe going also" (Alluding to the trip Mr. Silo is taking.) As above using last year's decoder pin the message is nothing but a bunch of mixed-up and jumbled letters, with no meaning

Although the cost of getting a new decoder pin each year was rather minimal, (Just the inner wax paper seal from a jar of Ovaltine, and a few cents for shipping and handling), if you multiply that by the great number of listeners who bought Ovaltine in order to get their inner seal, and the fact, that the premium was changed each year, the profit would soon be more than just pocket change for the company.

Ovaltine didn't stop with just the decoder pins; they also promoted plastic and metal Ovaltine mugs and Ovaltine Shake-Up mugs, used in drinking their product, as they said, "Just like Annie uses, fellas

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and gals". With the Shake-Up mugs, a booklet was included to tell how to make an ice-cold Ovaltine drink, that was sure to make boys and girls "husky, happy and healthy", just like Little Orphan Annie herself. This was called the "Summer time Shake-up game", where you filled your Shake-up mug with cold milk, Ovaltine, sugar and some cracked ice, and then the removable top of the mug was put back on, and shaken good and hard, then the top was removed and the shaker turns into a drinking mug, thus, the name "Shake-up mug".

During the Quaker sponsored years of the program premiums were still offered, but most of them were more associated with an aviation theme, which at that time formed an image and influence that the Captain Sparks character had on the program. This was another contributing factor to the program's demise.

Since the Quaker run of sponsorship was short, the premiums offered were not as abundantly produced, so in a way they are possibly more collectable today than some of the Ovaltine items offered because of their scarcity.

I have seen the 1942 Captain Sparks cockpit going for \$446.00 and the 1941 Secret Guard Kit selling for \$295.00, with the 1942 Safety Guard Kit hitting a whopping \$695.00 asking price. All of these were on the internet, while many Ovaltine products were less than \$50.00, some as low as \$15.00.

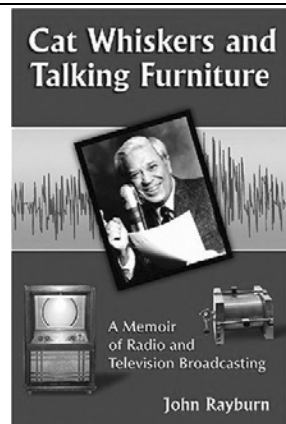
To be continued



RETURN WITH US NOW...

Cat Whiskers and Talking Furniture A Memoir of Radio and Television Broadcasting

By John Rayburn
A Review by Carol Tiffany



This retrospective on John Rayburn's nearly 6 decades in radio and television is both an autobiography and a fascinating anecdotal history of broadcasting from the viewpoint of someone who was on the forefront of the development of radio and television news, sports, and entertainment. The chronology of the book, beginning with the "cat whisker" crystal receivers of the early 1920s and progressing through current webcasts, provides a reflection of the technological developments of the twentieth century.

For this reader the most delightful aspects of this book are the many and varied glimpses "behind the scenes" which provide both insight and understanding. As a native of Cincinnati, I was especially impressed with the stories about the development of station WLW and the neighboring DuMont Network. Many of the well-known personalities appearing in this book are seen in a different light because the author knew them "offstage". The stories about well-remembered people and incidents provide valuable detail and delightful additions to the reader's store of knowledge.

An OTR buff himself, Mr. Rayburn shows a bit of a bias towards "the theater of the mind" as his entertainment venue of choice. The author is well-known as a wit and many of the vignettes in this book are very humorous. However, much of the material contained in this book is invaluable to the serious historian. This book will appeal to researchers seeking insightful detail, but will also be enjoyed by OTR collectors and just folks interested in the history of broadcasting.

Cat Whiskers and Talking Furniture: A Memoir of Radio and Television Broadcasting. John Rayburn
Photos, index, 256 pp. softcover June, 2008, \$35.00
McFarland & Company, Inc., Publishers
Box 611, Jefferson, NC 28640
800-253-2187
<http://www.mcfarlandpub.com>

The Trivial Matter of OTR's Comic Roots

*In addition to **Annie**, many of the classic OTR series had their roots in Comic books or newspaper comic strips. From the description given, try to identify the title and/or lead character of the show.*

- 1) This red-headed teenager was constantly torn between his two girlfriends, blonde Betty Cooper and brunette Veronica Lodge.
- 2) This young college athlete and friend Dale Arden left Earth to battle Ming the Merciless on the planet Mongo.
- 3) This young man fell asleep in the 20th century and woke up in the 25th where he met Wilma Deering, a woman warrior defending Earth.
- 4) This young wife and mother of two children had to cope with the most bumbling husband on record.
- 5) Skeezix Wallet and Wilmer Bobble were partners in the Wallet and Bobble Garage.
- 6) Pat Ryan and Terry Lee were adventurers in the Far East during WWII.
- 7) Little Beaver was friend and sidekick to "America's famous fighting cowboy"...
- 8) With his pal, Tank Tinker, he was ever away on dangerous missions involving flying every type of aircraft imaginable.
- 9) "*Faster than a speeding bullet, more powerful than a locomotive, able to leap tall buildings in a single bound.*"
- 10) This "singing cowboy" had adventures between songs down on his Melody Ranch.



New in the Tape and CD Libraries

by Maletha King

This month we're offering a selection of CDs for those members who enjoy the mystery and intrigue of the war years - and spy catching. "Spy Catcher", which is a BBC show, tells of British efforts during WWII that try to control the enemy infiltrators spying on troops and invasion plans.

The rest of our CD offerings are shows from "Casey, Crime Photographer". Casey helps the police solve crimes, and helps RHAC members bring back memories of life during the 1940s.



Answers to Comic Roots quiz

- 1) Archie Andrews
- 2) Flash Gordon
- 3) Buck Rogers
- 4) Blondie Bunsstead
- 5) Gasoline Alley
- 6) Terry and the Pirates
- 7) Red Ryder
- 8) Hop Harrigan
- 9) Superman (aka Clark Kent)
- 10) Gene Autry

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