

BERGEN & McCARTHY

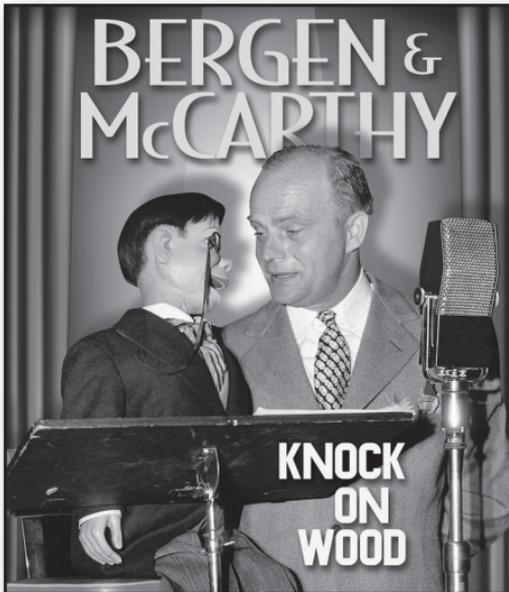
Knock on Wood

Program Guide by Karl Shadow

Broadway Eddie, Pedro, Lamb Chop, Jerry Mahoney and Judy Splinters were each endowed with a distinctive personality. Their creators -- The Great Lester, Señor Wines, Shari Lewis, Paul Winchell and Shirley Dinsdale, respectively -- were prominent ventriloquists. These unique acts were vaudeville, night club, and television headliners. There was one mild-mannered gentleman, however, who created a legendary character in the least likely venue imaginable for the vocation: radio. This entertaining duo is, of course, Edgar Bergen and his impertinent dummy, Charlie McCarthy.

Bergen's first network radio performance was on December 17, 1936, as a guest on NBC's *Royal Gelatin Hour* (starring Rudy Vallée). Although he was a newcomer to the air, Robert Landry (*Variety*, December 30, 1936) remarked that Bergen: "... makes the jump into radio with nonchalant ease...style and delivery are natural and ingratiating." In short, Landry felt that the novice was: "An artiste - in the

old and best meaning." Indeed, Bergen had spent some fifteen years on the various vaudeville circuits. The adventure had commenced in 1921, following his studies at Northwestern University. By 1926, Bergen (assisted by Charlie, and a small cadre of other wooden figures) was on his way to the top. In a June 30, 1926 *Variety* review, Ed Barry gave Bergen credit for "having outdistanced many in weaving a comedy of logical plot and plenty of entertainment." Bergen's big break came in 1936, when he and Charlie were 'discovered'



performing at New York's Rainbow Room. It was that undertaking that ultimately led to the booking with Vallée, who had a knack for introducing new stars to the radio public (including Alice Faye and Joe Penner, among others).

After appearing on the *Royal Gelatin Hour* for several weeks, Bergen and McCarthy were cast as regulars on another sixty-minute variety program, *The Chase & Sanborn Hour*. One of the larger advertisers of the medium, Standard Brands, Inc. promoted both the confectionery and coffee brands cited above. The company had a history of successful radio programs during the 1930s, featuring such stars as Eddie Cantor and Major Bowes. Those shows, in addition to Rudy Vallée's, were packaged by the J. Walter Thompson advertising agency. Numerous staff members from this firm were responsible for Bergen's initial contract, and his continued popularity, including George Faulkner, Gordon Thompson, Calvin Kuhl, Carroll Carroll, Richard Mack, Tony Stanford and Earl Ebi (all of whom worked under John Reber, head of the JWT radio department).

The initial episode aired on May 9, 1937. It featured Don Ameche (as the emcee) and W.C. Fields (below), as well as other major stars, but received mixed reviews. *Variety* (May 12, 1937) noted that Bergen: "...didn't have particularly good material for so auspicious an occasion as his first network stardom. His act continues to swell air novelty, but he'll have to keep his grip via material." Benn Hall (*The Billboard*, May 22, 1937) expressed more optimism: "Comedy, wholesome and deft, overshadowed the other fine contributions on this program. That is as it should be. With such prime funny men as Bergen and Fields, this was a field day for fun."



Don Ameche



W.C. Fields

Bergen and McCarthy's continued success rated special recognition with an editorial in *The New York Times* (July 10, 1937). Entitled "SAUCY CHARLIE," the treatise proclaimed: "Since Charlie's radio audience cannot see him, Mr. Bergen has had to concentrate on the tone of the simulated voice and the wit of the script. Both of these things he has done with such skill and originality that Charlie has become the most real personality on the comic airwaves this season." The anonymous columnist referred to Charlie as an: "overbred brat of the radio...impudent, lazy, egotistical and artful...and has no respect for his betters." Finally, readers

were warned: "...his personality is developing so rapidly that even Mr. Bergen is losing control of him, and week by week, has less and less to say for himself."

Not only were the audience ratings (and sale of Chase & Sanborn Coffee) booming, but Edgar and Charlie were also credited with inspiring an unprecedented interest in ventriloquism at both the amateur and professional levels. A report in *Newsweek* (July 17, 1937) noted that Frank Marshall, the leading manufacturer of ventriloquist puppets, was enjoying his best year in a decade. Based in Chicago, Marshall was the business successor to the late Charles Mack, who had originally been engaged by Edgar Bergen to assist in the construction of the McCarthy physique.

In any discussion of the 1937 Chase & Sanborn program, the infamous Mae West skit is always worthy of a brief mention. Though this caused much consternation for NBC, Standard Brands, and J. Walter Thompson, Edgar Bergen escaped unscathed. West (below) was not so lucky, however, becoming *persona non grata* on the etherwaves. At issue was her parlay with Don Ameche in the "Adam and Eve" skit, a performance that continues to be reviewed and studied today, especially in academia. As for Charlie and Mae, *Variety* (December 15, 1937) remarked disappointingly: "Sex queen and lumber king failed to saw wood as anticipated."

Edgar Bergen also developed a career for himself in movies. For his role in several 1930s Warner Bros. Vitaphone films, he was bestowed an Honorary Oscar in 1938. Amusingly, the award statuette was constructed of wood, instead of the customary metal components. During 1938, the popularity of Edgar and Charlie continued to soar. Their program attained the number one position...not only among hour-long format series, but in all of radio. In mid-1938, Bergen signed a new contract with Universal Studios, and he appeared with Charlie in their first feature. His efforts in *Letter of Introduction* were applauded by *Newsweek* (August 15, 1938): "...the familiar Bergen-McCarthy give-and-take is worked neatly into the script." The same article also made note of a new wooden friend in the family: "As an added attraction, and a warning to Charlie, the ventriloquist introduces another puppet personality - the buck-toothed and



Mae West



Edgar Bergen with Mortimer Snerd

bucolic Mortimer Snerd.” Would Charlie’s country cousin dare to make a radio appearance? Indeed, his debut in the aural medium would take place the following season, on November 5, 1939.

Though *The Chase & Sanborn Hour* was broadcast from Hollywood in 1939, a clause in Edgar Bergen’s contract allowed him (upon request), to bring the show to other venues (especially New York). Between two such East Coast episodes in March of that year, a most unusual stunt was contrived. On the evening of March 14th, while Bergen was enjoying an evening on the town with friends, *New York World-Telegram* amusement editor Frank Farrell was carrying out a somewhat nefarious plot. Seeking a humorous gag for his paper, he snatched Charlie from Edgar’s lodgings at the Waldorf-Astoria. Upon returning to his hotel room, Bergen became mightily concerned. The kidnapping generated a media storm for the twelve hours that Charlie was missing. The much maligned Farrell decided to return Charlie five days earlier than he had anticipated. There were no charges pressed against the newspaperman by Bergen, who wanted the incident quickly forgotten. It was not even mentioned during the following Sunday’s episode.

While publicity in newspapers was a regular occurrence for Charlie and Company, the fourth estate would also provide the medium for a new undertaking. In the summer of 1939, Edgar Bergen entered the comic pages. The idea for the strip came from Bergen and his secretary Mary Hanrahan. She would later become his personal manager, while directing the activities behind the Charlie McCarthy merchandise concerns that netted the Bergen operation thousands of dollars each year. The comic was printed under the Bergen byline, with initial artwork courtesy of Ben Batsford. Distributed by the McNaught Syndicate, it was billed under the title of *Mortimer and Charlie*. The daily debuted on July 10th followed by a July 16th Sunday installment. Given the popularity of the Bergen enterprise, it is surprising that the strip had such a short tenure, ceasing mid-story in May of 1940. The reasons contributing to its cancellation are still to be ascertained.



In January of 1940, the Bergen-McCarthy venture was retitled *The Chase & Sanborn Program*. It became a thirty-minute session, retaining the first half of NBC’s Sunday 8 o’clock

hour. 1940 would also include the program's first summer break. During this hiatus, Edgar Bergen began to seriously engage in one of his favorite hobbies: aviation. He purchased a single-engine Stinson 105, and had a silhouette of Charlie emblazoned upon the side. Bergen's aeronautical interests were profiled in the January 1941 issue of *Flying and Popular Aviation*. He explained his affinity for the sport: "I like airplanes because I like mechanical perfection...I like flying because it means freedom from nervous strain. It means relaxation. I can get all tangled up in a radio script, plans for a motion picture and six other jobs. Then I can take off and forget about everything for a little while. I come down with a clear head." In addition to the promotional activities, the aviation industry benefited from Bergen's philanthropic endeavors when the ventriloquist instituted a foundation to assist in the instruction of commercial pilots. Bergen's charitable enterprises also included the training of student nurses and radio script writers.

The 1941-42 Chase & Sanborn season commenced on September 7th with a new orchestra, led by Ray Noble. It was a reunion of sorts, as Noble had worked with Bergen at the Rainbow Room in 1935. Though the ratings had slipped a little during the past couple of seasons, the program was still among the top five in various surveys. During the 1942 summer break, Edgar Bergen (accompanied by Charlie and Mortimer) engaged in what *Movie-Radio Guide* (October 3, 1942) called: "the biggest theater they ever played in - the theater of war in Alaska." Over a period of twelve days in August, they journeyed 14,000 miles to entertain the troops, who exuberantly enjoyed the star's 51 shows.

This collection features the first sixteen episodes of the 1942-43 season (many of which were considered lost and are heard here for the first time since their original broadcasts). Not surprisingly, the first and second chapters (September 6th and 13th) retold the experiences of that USO tour. Paul Denis (*The Billboard*, September 19, 1942) found the proceedings to be: "...still silly and punny; but Bergen's masterful timing and McCarthy's squeaky voice made the gags sound really funny." Don Ameche returned as emcee. (He had been off the program for a year and nine months.) Added to the cast was Pat Patrick as the stooge Ercil Twing. Ray Noble continued to lead the orchestra and arrange many of the songs. Of Dale Evans warbling, Ben Bodec (*Variety*, September 9, 1942) remarked: "...the vocal newcomer, knows her way about when it comes to putting over a rhythm number. Both her voice and manner are decidedly pleasant." Though



Dale Evans

they were rarely acknowledged during the broadcasts, the accompanying choral group is The Sportsmen Quartet. Clinton ‘Buddy’ Twiss, head of the KFI-NBC Hollywood announcing corps, read the copy for both the java and Tender Leaf Tea commercials.

The visitors you’ll hear include movie stars (Charles Ruggles and Marjorie Main) and radio personalities (Hal Peary as The Great Gildersleeve). Moreover, two noteworthy individuals who had been longtime favorites from the early years of the Bergen-McCarthy program were received with exceptional fervor: W. C. Fields and Nelson Eddy. The entire cast became guests during the month of October as they traveled east to perform at various military facilities.

In a rare appearance without his “chip of pinewood,” Edgar Bergen was a guest on the August 13, 1944 *Old Gold Show*. In that episode of the series, Bergen introduced a female dummy, whose name had not yet been chosen. She would later garner the moniker “Effie Klinker.” (The surname was borrowed from one of Bergen’s writers, Zeno Klinker.) The Bergen publicity machine, spearheaded by the Thompson agency’s Wick Crider, scored slick profiles of the crew in two major magazines within the same month. The newest member of the Bergen clan was introduced to readers of *LOOK* (November 28th): “Charlie McCarthy’s Aunt Effie Klinker is a beamy, bosomy bachelor-girl of 40-odd with a wit almost as quick as Charlie’s and a heart as soft as sawdust.” The previous week, the entire gang had been featured on the cover of *Time* (November 20th). That publication’s feature story contained an extensive interview with Edgar Bergen, who admitted that he was growing weary of the radio scene: “I have reached rather an unfortunate time of my life. There is nothing more tiring than looking forward to five or six more years of radio. I am a creative artist and this is routine work for me now.”



Edgar Bergen & Charlie McCarthy.

In 1945, Edgar Bergen received radio’s premiere trophy. The citation read: “Working with a formula sanctioned by long usage and great popularity, Edgar Bergen has brought to the air a mimicry, an original wit, and a power of characterization which are refreshing. To him and his incomparable but underpaid assistants, Charley McCarthy and Mortimer Snerd, a Peabody Award for many laughs.” That missive caught the flavor of one of the better jokes

promulgated throughout the program's annals, that of the meager allowances Bergen afforded his dummies.

The Charlie McCarthy Show continued on NBC until December of 1948, when Standard Brands ceased its sponsorship due to budgetary constraints. Edgar Bergen opted to take a leave of absence from radio and revisit his old roots: vaudeville. He described that particular institution in an exposé of the two competing performing arts (*The New York Times*, October 2, 1949): "A beautiful theatrical world of backstage, split weeks, singers, electricians, acrobats, property men, stagehands, jugglers." He understood and appreciated the contributions of all involved in making an entertainment act a success. Several of the unsung NBC staff members who worked on his radio program included associate producer/directors Andrew Love and Karl Gruner; sound effects artists John Glennon, Dorothy Waknitz and Chester Petersen; and studio engineers Ed Miller and Leon Fry. Bergen concluded his reflections with the following statements: "Some people have asked me if I was back in vaudeville to get ready for television. As a matter of fact, I went back to vaudeville to get ready for radio." On October 2, 1949, Bergen returned to his former Sunday, 8 pm slot, but this time on CBS. After seven additional seasons, bankrolled by various sponsors, his consummate network radio career came to a close in 1956.

Episodes Include:

CD 1

A: Guest: Charles Ruggles - 09/06/1942

B: Guest: Rita Hayworth - 09/13/1942

CD 2

A: Guest: The Great Gildersleeve - 09/20/1942

B: Guest: Hedy Lamarr - 09/27/1942

CD 3

A: From: Ft. Monmouth, New Jersey - 10/04/1942

B: From: Annapolis, Maryland - 10/11/1942

CD 4

A: From: Quantico, Virginia - 10/18/1942

B: From: West Point, New York - 10/25/1942



Rita Hayworth



Hedy Lamarr

CD 5

A: Back in Hollywood - 11/01/1942

B: Guest: W. C. Fields - 11/08/1942

CD 6

A: Guest: Edward Arnold - 11/15/1942

B: Guest: Marjorie Main - 11/22/1942

CD 7

A: Guest: Edward Everett Horton - 11/29/1942

B: Guest: Marjorie Main - 12/06/1942



Edward Everett Horton

CD 8

A: Guest: Nelson Eddy - 12/13/1942

B: Christmas Show - 12/20/1942

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