

TALES OF THE TWENTIES

RADIO: The noisy baby grew quickly

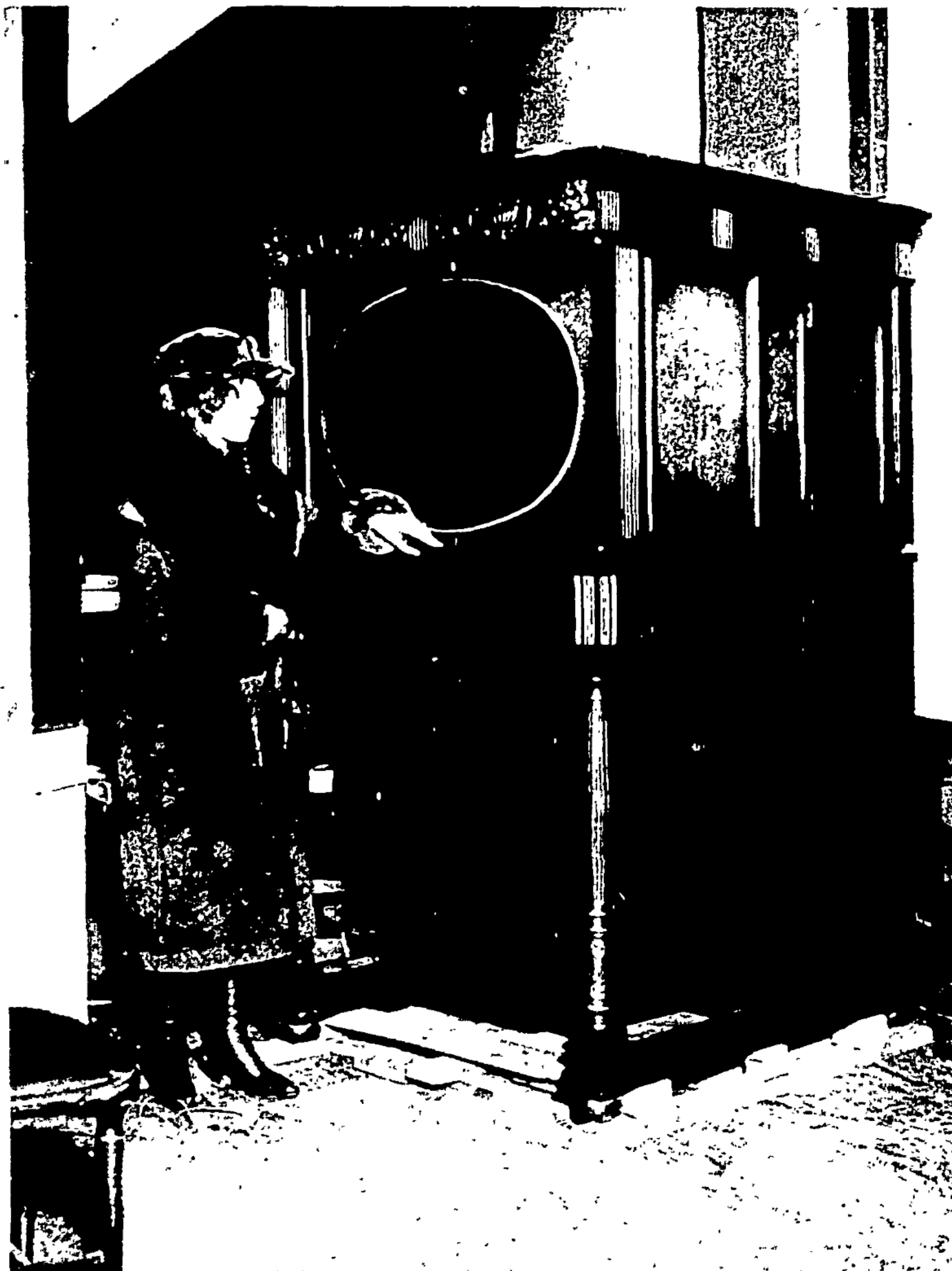
By GARRETT D. BYRNES

THE HERITAGE left us by The Twenties is a mixed bag. A grievous national error called Prohibition endowed us with a hard core underworld. Jazz goes back to Africa and the Deep South but it surfaced during that tumultuous decade to become the best of our national music. The Harding-Coolidge-Hoover-stock market crash succession resulted in the seldom-interrupted Democratic ascendancy. The movies learned to talk and, at first, they were just plain entertaining but now, to see a talkie, you have to show an ID card and prove you can measure up to the dirt.

Then, there was radio. In the long run, radio may turn out to be our major inheritance from The Twenties. Of all the bouncing babies of that decade, it was the one which grew fastest and made the most noise.

Just when the human voice was first heard over the air is moot. The Federal Communications Commission says it may have been in 1892 when Nathan B. Stubblefield, in a demonstration near Murray, Kentucky, said "Hello Rainey" over the air to someone, presumably named Rainey, at a receiving station nearby. Then again, according to FCC, it may have been Reginald Aubrey Fessenden who broadcast the first voice message; his vocal signals from Brant Rock, Massachusetts, were heard by nearby ships in 1906. Lee De Forest had the great Caruso on the air experimentally in 1910 and the United States Navy managed transatlantic voice tests from Arlington, Virginia, in 1915.

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SUPER DOUBLE DUPER receiver displayed at N.Y. radio show in 20s.

AS THE TWENTIES BEGAN, the electronic wizards were ready. They knew how to do it. But on the receiving end, there were a relatively few "ham" operators with sophisticated apparatus and lots of kids who tuned in on their galena crystal-cat whisker detectors and tuning coils wound on oatmeal containers.

In 1920, it was wireless but within a year or so, the name of the game had changed to radio for all except Al Smith who, to the end, insisted it was "raddio."

KDKA, pioneering in Pittsburgh, put out the first broadcast of election returns in 1920. At the Pawtucket Boys Club, "Pop" Morton had a galena crystal set with earphones and he let his boys listen. One of them was a kid named Mowry Lowe who was switched on by the new wonder and, in 1930, got into commercial radio where he remained until a month ago, most recently as general manager of WLKW.

KDKA was quickly followed by other stations which poured out news and ball games, sports scores, church services, music sacred and profane and the solemn mouthings of the politicians. In no time, it was apparent that — to use a current phrase — this new mass-medium could sell tires and gingerale, soap and political soft soap.

Although KDKA remains an acknowledged pioneer, it was WBZ at Springfield, Massachusetts, which became the first federally licensed broadcasting station on September 15, 1921. The Pittsburgh station got its ticket from the Department of Commerce on November 17, 1921.

The radio baby grew faster than most. By the end of 1922, 670 stations had been federally licensed but there was an infant mortality of 14 per cent of the stations.



GAY AFTERNOON in 1923, listening in on a one-tube, battery-powered set.

IN RHODE ISLAND the race was on between the Shepard Stores and the Outlet to be first on the air. Shepard won and its station WEAN, now one of the broadcasting stations of the Providence Journal Company, went on the air on June 2, 1922.

Precisely what the pioneer broadcasts here consisted of seems to have been lost in time. I can find no record of it. But three days later, on the editorial page of the *Providence Journal* on Monday, June 5, the WEAN programs for the day were listed as: 3 to 5 p.m., musical program; 6:10 p.m., bedtime stories; 7:30 p.m., baseball scores; 8 to 10 p.m., musical program.

Shepard got on the air first, apparently, by engaging a local "ham" operator to put together some transmitting equipment which would take care of things until the station's more powerful equipment was ready. The first WEAN studio was on the fourth floor of the Shepard Store where the rug department is today. Soon, the studio was

moved to the second floor alongside the Colonial Restaurant, a popular establishment where there was dinner dancing each evening from 6 to 8.

When the Outlet's WJAR came on the air for the first time on the evening of September 6, 1922, it was with a truly loud voice, "the most powerful in this area," so powerful that it could be heard "even in Chicago."

If anyone in Chicago was listening that Wednesday night at 8 p.m. (7 Central Time), he heard an orchestra from the brand new Providence Biltmore Hotel under Maestro I. Nagel pump out some popular tunes, an address by Mayor Joseph H. Gainer who said how dandy Providence was, and minor addresses by the mayors of Cranston, Central Falls and Taunton, presumably saying those cities were dandy, too. Maestro Nagel contributed a violin solo and a divine from Brookline, Massachusetts, the Rev. Dr. Willard Scott, contributed what the newspapers of that day referred to as

"humor." Maybe a stand-up comic "formerly of the Keith Circuit" named Frank Bush was funnier. Andreas Arup, who was playing in vaudeville at Fay's, sang songs; Governor Emery J. San Souci's principal address supported "law and order." The only hitch in the program involved a canary named Lucy Isabelle Marsh who was billed to appear but didn't because she was under contract to the Victor Phonograph Company. The company apparently was not going to squander its contract talent on a new upstart called radio.

Our first two stations began on an off-again-on-again-Finnegan basis. At first the Outlet had two programs a week. Both stations, when they began broadcasting daily, operated intermittently with long periods of silence.

LIKE ALL INFANTS, the new stations learned by doing. Contrasted with today's precise professionalism, there seems to have been a charming sense

of playfulness, innovation and just plain joy in doing something new.

These impressions of the early years of local broadcasting are based, for the most part, on the happy recollections of two men who were very much there. James A. Reilly, now a special agent for the R.I. SPCA, worked for WEAN and WJAR, and Sothorn Abbott was an insurance clerk who also was a compulsive baritone who sang into any available microphone. Of all the radio pioneers, Mr. Abbott is the only one still active in the business. Today, he is program director for WPJB-fm, one of the broadcasting stations of the Providence Journal Company, and there is every reason to believe that he is the dean of active radio men in Rhode Island.

Jim Reilly worked first for WEAN but not for long. A bad storm delayed some singers from Attleboro who were supposed to provide the evening program. Jim told the audience there would be a delay and then, forgetting to shut

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RADIO

We heard the voice of an old and broken man in Washington

off the transmitter, called his home and said he'd be late for supper. The Attleboro chorus finally arrived and sang. But management was not amused by Jim's phone call and he found himself looking for a job.

The Samuels brothers of the Outlet, Joseph and Leon, deeply interested in their new station, took Jim Reilly on as program director (Leon had heard the phone call and was amused by it). In his new job, Jim apparently did everything but sweep out.

One of his chores was to go over to Westminster Street and take notes from the news bulletins and sports scores displayed at either side of the entrance to the old Journal Building and then

hurry back to WJAR and get the news on the air as quickly as possible. (Some years later, before these newspapers had their own radio stations, the *Journal-Bulletin* piped several news programs daily to WJAR. But all that belongs to later decades.)

WJAR arranged with churches of all denominations to broadcast services, there were frequent evening programs saluting Rhode Island communities with music and other entertainment provided by the townsfolk themselves, and the politicians, even then, were given equal time. Jim Reilly recalls only one instance when the station had to pull the switch on a candidate because he didn't stick to his script.

A PIONEER in R.I. broadcasting was James A. Reilly of WJAR. In the '20s, it frequently was suggested that the Outlet station's call letters derived from Jim's initials but this was not so.



SULTAN OF SWAT is interviewed by Graham McNamee at Yankee Stadium

The Outlet station drew a big first in radio history through a happy coincidence. Hetty Green's son, Col. Edward Howland Robinson Green, at his Round Hills estate in South Dartmouth, Massachusetts, rode several hobbies, among them aviation, old whale ships (he enshrined the *Charles W. Morgan* at Round Hills before the vessel was moved to Mystic), and radio. Colonel Green's elaborate hobby station was WMAF and he had big amplifiers hung on light poles in the neighborhood so that his neighbors could enjoy the programs. Some of them didn't; they thought the new sound over the air was a public nuisance.

Colonel Green could afford almost anything he wanted and so, at a cost of about \$60,000 a year, he arranged with AT&T over its long lines to hook WMAF up with WEAFF in New York. Jim Reilly drove over to the Green estate, got acquainted with the colonel and noted that the programs from New York came over the telephone lines loud and clear. He also discovered that the lines came through Providence.

So the Samuels brothers looked into the matter, made a contract with AT&T to cut in on the WEAFF programs and thus became the first commercial station to become part of a network. That was in October, 1923.

The network agreement was concluded only a few days before the World Series between the Giants and Yankees was to begin in New York on the 10th. The Providence station needed some special equipment for its chain operation and also to pipe the play-by-play of the Series games through amplifiers to listeners in Garnet Street. It was pretty much of a scramble.

Jim Reilly went to WEAFF, arranged for the necessary gear, got it aboard a

Pullman car at Grand Central especially engaged for the purpose, and when the car arrived in Providence, Outlet trucks were waiting. WJAR broadcast the Series and the crowd in Garnet Street heard the games through six-foot sound horns. The listeners were unaware that those big horns were part of the equipment Western Electric engineers were perfecting for the talking movies, still several years away.

Affiliation with WEAFF brought WJAR the weekly programs of Roxy (S. L. Rothafel) and His Gang from the Capitol Theater in New York. These so-called "concerts" were on Sunday evenings, followed by an hour-long recital on the Skinner organ.

On the day before Armistice Day, 1923, an old and broken man in Washington who despised radio spoke into a microphone in tones halting and sometimes inaudible. His wife could be heard prompting in the background. It was Woodrow Wilson's last address and Rhode Islanders heard it over WJAR via station WCAP in Washington and WEAFF. In the following February, the same three stations carried Woodrow Wilson's funeral services from the National Cathedral. Although there had been other earlier hookups from city to city, these broadcasts involving the stations in Washington, New York and Providence were pioneer special events in network broadcasting.

Locally, WJAR picked up luncheon and dinner music from the Narragansett and Biltmore Hotels, a Mrs. Marian Wood conducted a Housewives Exchange in the morning on a program sponsored by Rumford baking powder, and whenever the Providence Festival Chorus under John B. Archer performed, Jim Reilly had to make sure that the equipment was ready. That involved the steps of City Hall for the Christmas Eve concert and lines to Roger Williams Park for the concert, with the Goldman Band and an opera star, at the Benedict Temple of Music. For the park concerts, alternate equipment had to be installed in the Rhode Island Auditorium in case of bad

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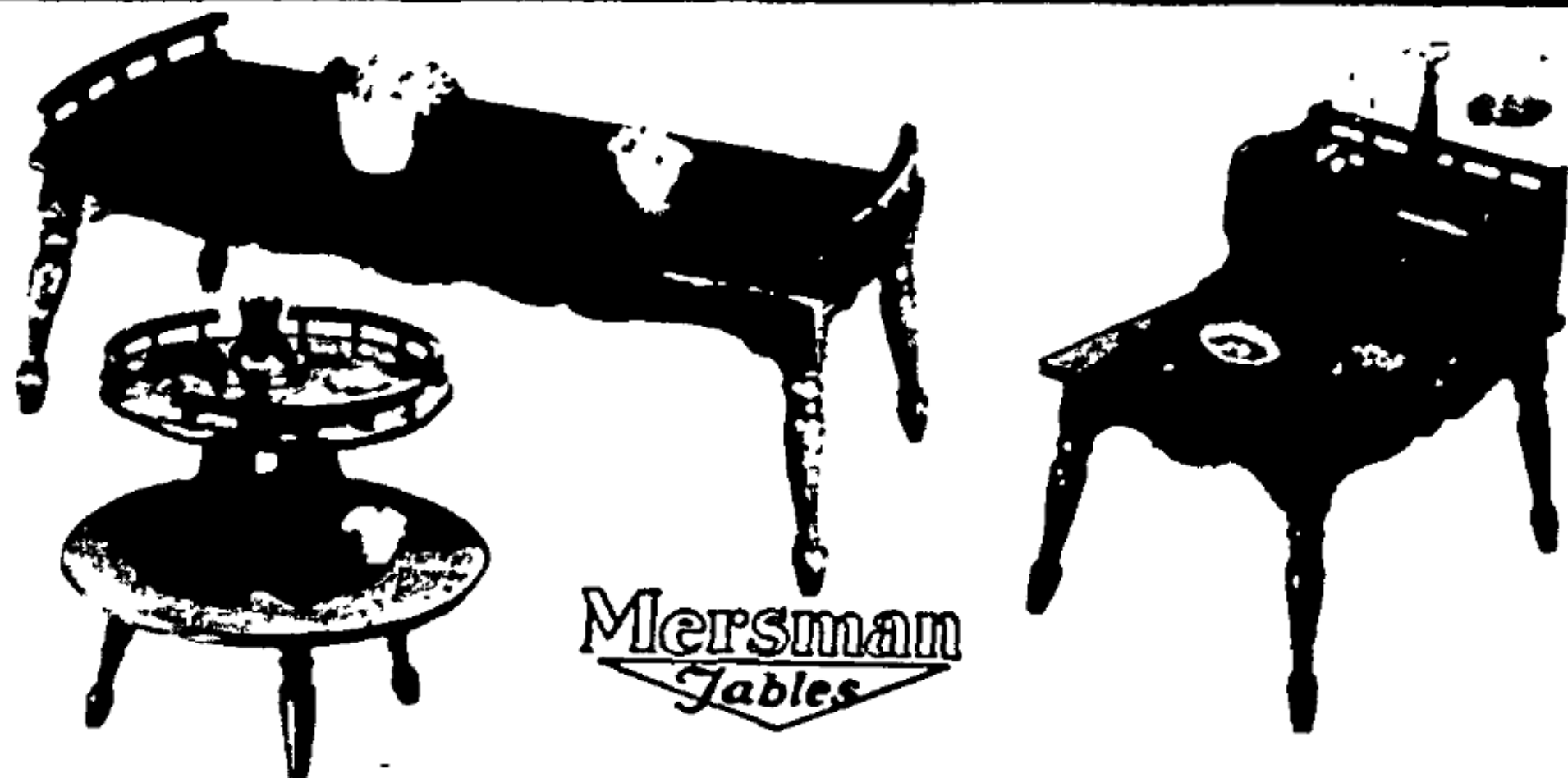
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DEAN of R.I. radio: 'Sud' Abbott first sang over air locally in 1922.

RADIO

'The man from Mandalay'

weather. When the Auditorium staged major sports events, Jim Reilly not only had to arrange for the broadcasts but do much of the announcing.

Today's radio dean in Rhode Island, Sothorn Abbott, got into the business as a performer, singing under his own name as early as 1922 on WEAN. The baritone balladeer had certain favorites, notably *Roses of Picardy* and *On the Road to Mandalay*. He sang the latter so frequently that his friends began to call him the man from Mandalay.

"Sud" Abbott sang his first songs into the large end of a megaphone, the small end of which was held against a standard telephone transmitter. "You really had to belt it to get through," he says. One night, he was singing and the phone rang. Carl Spear, the engineer, answered. It was Robert F. Shepard who said, "He isn't very loud. Why don't you use your new carbon microphone?"

Such was the casual, impromptu nature of radio in those early days, Mr. Spear told his radio audience "that due to technical difficulties, WEAN is signing off. We'll be back in a few minutes."

The new mike was rigged and Mr. Abbott sang into it. The phone rang and again it was Mr. Shepard with the comment, "He's too loud."

The Shepard station evolved something called the WEAN Noonday Club. During the lunch hour, apparently anyone who wanted to sing or play the piano or fiddle simply dropped in at the studio, was introduced under a ficti-

tious name by the announcer, R. Foster Reynolds, and went on. Mr. Abbott's air name was Herbert Tareyton and on one occasion, his singing teacher, Willard Amison, was casually introduced as "Herb's brother, Steven Tareyton."

The happy WEAN Noonday crew caught on so well that the program also ran Sunday evenings and fans got in the habit of sending sandwiches, pie, cake, doughnuts and coffee to the studio for the volunteer performers. The whole thing was so young and informal that no effort was made to keep down the background noises in the studio; all the performers had to remember was to keep it clean. It sounded like a party and it was, a party which kept going just as long as the requests by telephone kept coming.

The chain broadcast begun between WEAF and WJAR grew quickly and came to be known as NBC. WEAN and its Shepard affiliate in Boston, WNAC, were the foundation stations for the Yankee Network and subsequently links in the CBS chain.

THERE WAS only a casual federal control of radio at first and the whole thing became bedlam with stations popping up all over. In Providence, WDWB (Duttee Flint), WLSI (the Lincoln Studios), WSAD (Foster's Jewelry) and WCOP (Jake Conn) joined the din.

Nationally, radio was to create many
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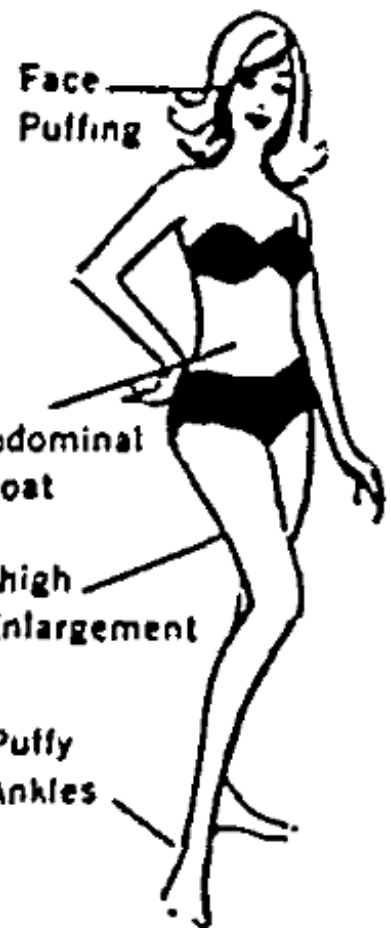
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10

Providence Sunday Journal

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HAPPINESS BOYS,
Billy Jones and Ernie
Hare, were radio's
first comedy team.



RADIO

The mysterious 'Uncle Red'

new entertainment stars and units—Graham McNamee and Milton Cross, the Happiness Boys and the "Silver Masked Tenor" (Joseph M. White) who sang with the Goodrich Silvertown Orchestra, Walter Damrosch and Vaughn de Leath, Jessica Dragonette and, late in the decade, Freeman "Amos" Gosden and Charles "Andy" Correll who were to take the nation, laughing when they were on, into Depression.

The Rhode Island stations produced some names, too, in The Twenties. There was "Uncle Red" (Harrah K. Bennett) who, using the hidden identity gimmick of the Silver Masked Tenor, in 1926 started a highway safety program for children which was aired far beyond Rhode Island. There was the Rhode Island Historian (John W. Haley) whose weekly broadcasts for the Old Stone Bank started in the late Twenties and continued for many years. The *Journal-Bulletin's* sports editor, Charlie Coppen, enlarged his local celebrity status by broadcasting Brown football games, using "a cripple" from each team as spotters. And Linus Travers, a golden-voiced student from Brown, started with WEAN and went on to make the Yankee Network a potent regional chain.

THE SWIFT ONRUSH of radio in The Twenties is reflected nowhere better than in the pages of the *Journal-Bulletin*. There were papers which believed the new baby would put the newspapers out of business, just as years later, TV was going to destroy newspapers and radio. The fearful papers elected to give radio the silent treatment. Not the *Journal-Bulletin*.

Even before WEAN and WJAR began, the *Journal-Bulletin* was carrying

program listings for stations in Pittsburgh, Springfield, New York and Medford Hillside, Massachusetts. Before long, the Sunday programs ran at great length, listing not only scores of U.S. stations coast to coast but many in Canada and Cuba.

The news features which went on the radio pages were not about programs and performers, however. They were strictly how-to-do-it articles with arcane headlines like "Calculation of Impedance and Reactance Values Explained." Jim Henderson, one of our cartoonists already acknowledging the automobile with "The Motorization of Mr. Mann" added a panel called "Short Circuits" which chronicled the woes of the radio fan whose batteries were always leaking or going dead.

Sunday after Sunday, the radio pages carried diagrams of elaborate hookups, and stories, such as "Efficient Conical Speakers May Be Constructed at Slight Cost." Something called "Vagrant Waves of Interest to Fans" told readers that "One long wire for your aerial is better than several short ones," "A cheap set will work much better with a good pair of telephones," "When installing guys on your aerial masts, it is advisable to use wire rope because ordinary rope shrinks when wet," and "There are 3,000 manufacturers of radio sets and accessories in the United States."

The advertising on the radio pages showed increasingly sophisticated equipment as The Twenties sped by. There were names like Atwater-Kent, Grebe Synchrophase, Crosby, Radiola, World Master Operola and Kolster. Super-hets took the place of cat whisker sets, the messy batteries gave way to receiving sets powered by A.C. current and aerials were going out of style.

From virtually nothing in 1920, radio in 10 years became a noisy giant with sets in one out of two homes. It was, indeed, quite a baby. □