

Brother Gos and Brother Charlie

The Story of Amos 'n' Andy

by Sir Knight Peter H. Johnson, Jr., P.G.C. of Arizona

. (The program) has all the pathos, humor, vanity, glory, problems and solutions that beset ordinary mortals-and therein lies its universal appeal."-Roy Wilkins quoted from the Baltimore Afro-American, March 22, 1930

The Joe Bren Minstrel Company was definitely "small time." The Joe Bren staff traveled the predominately small town, post World War I United States helping local "wannabes" star in minstrel shows to raise funds for such fraternal orders as the Elks, Masons, Knights of Pythias, and Shrine. Although highly racist by modern standards, the shows had evolved greatly from the low comedy of around 1900 when all blackface comics seemed to be associated with stealing chickens, shooting craps, drinking, and frequent brushes with the law. The shows of this later era featured songs and humor of the day and often spoofed classics such as the works of Shakespeare. The white entertainers, however, still appeared in blackface with exaggerated white lips, and the interlocutor and "end men" still pattered jokes in black dialect. Although the shows were more sophisticated than in previous times, blacks were still portrayed insensitively as one-dimensional buffoons without the normal range of human emotions.

In 1920 an eager young man named Freeman Gosden joined the Bren Company. Gosden could sing, dance, and was well versed in black dialects of the South. His experience, however, was almost all at the amateur level. The lanky Gosden was teamed up with the short and stocky Charles Correll and was instructed to teach him how to direct shows. In addition to their physical differences, the two men were also opposites in temperament. Gosden was goal oriented and highly motivated with a shy streak around new acquaintances.

Possibly the most widely-published "Amos 'n' Andy" publicity photo, this image was taken by theatrical photographer, Maurice Seymour, at the Bloom Studio in Chicago in early 1928 and was widely reproduced on various items of merchandise, both licensed and unlicensed, at the peak of the "Amos 'n' Andy" craze.

Conrell, however; was more easy going and made people around him feel at ease. The two personalities complemented each other, and "Gos" and Charlie would remain friends and partners for over 50 years.

1. Freeman Fisher Gosden was a true son of the old South, born in Richmond, Virginia, on May 5, 1899. He was the youngest of five children and the son of Walter Gosden, who served with Mosby's Rangers in the Confederate Cavalry during the Civil War. The elder Gosden held the modest position of bookkeeper, and the family lived in a rented home near Richmond's black district. Reversals in the family's finances prompted sixteen-year-old Freeman to quit high school and seek employment as a shipping clerk.

Tragedy seemed to grip the Gosden family. Brother Willie Gosden died in 1902 at age 19. Freeman's father died at age 66 in 1911, and Freeman's mother and sister were both killed in an automobile accident in 1918.

Young Freeman's solace was his interest in the theatre, nurtured by numerous visits to the local vaudeville shows. His other source of comfort was his wonderful black friend, Garrett Brown. Garrett was four years older than Freeman; however, both boys were sharp and quick-

witted and were interested in show business. The two friends loved to mimic minstrel show patter with Freeman as the interlocutor and Garrett as the end man. With Garrett's help, Freeman mastered the different black dialects prevalent around Richmond. Garrett was taken in by the Gosden family for four years, and the two boys became like brothers. Garrett, of course, was completely unaware that his relationship with his white friend Freeman would later bear fruit as an entertainment phenomenon that would touch virtually every American. Freeman continued to develop his thespian talents as a participant in amateur nights at local theatres. He finally made his professional debut in 1917, performing an "eccentric dance" with partner "Slim" O'Neil in Fredericksburg at a fund-raiser for the United Daughters of the Confederacy. About this same time, Freeman Gosden also enlisted in the U.S. Navy as America went to war. Young Gosden soon found that he was unfit for duty because of his chronic seasickness and was assigned to communications training at Harvard University to become a wireless operator. This training planted the seed of a lifelong interest in the new medium of radio.

Charles James Correll was also from a modest working class background. He was born on February 2, 1890, in Peoria, Illinois. His father, Joseph Correll, was a brick mason by trade. Charles was interested in dramatics at an early age. His first part was in his second grade play, and he continued to act in school productions throughout his school years, graduating from Peoria High School in 1907. Charles, also, had a few months of instruction on the piano and was fair at playing songs "by ear." After high school he became a stenographer for a short time and also tried his hand at laying bricks like his father. It soon became obvious that Charles was only interested in show business. After a brief stint at the Rock Island Arsenal in 1917 as a munitions worker, Charles Correll accepted a position with the Bren Minstrel Company with his father's approval.



Garrett Brown in 1930. Freeman Gosden's closest childhood friend proved a significant influence on the development of "Amos 'n' Andy" and was directly portrayed in the series during 1928-1929 as the character "Sylvester", bright, ambitious 19-year-old auto mechanic, who helped Amos and Andy get established in Chicago. The character of Amos likewise shared many personality traits with Brown. In a 1930 interview, Brown recalled that he and Gosden had only one serious fight during their decade growing up together, a fight instigated by Brown, who while walking home one afternoon suddenly decided, for no good

reason, to bounce a lime off his companion's head. Gosden failed to see the humor in the situation, and the two youths fought until exhausted, finally declaring their only major skirmish a draw. Garrett Brown left the Gosden home at the age of sixteen, moving to upstate New York with a companion, but after Army service in the First World War, he returned to Richmond, where he lived with his aunts and worked as a chauffeur. He and Freeman Gosden would continue to correspond for years after.

1. Despite their lack of professional training, the team of Freeman Gosden and Charles Correll became a fair song and dance act. Charles played the piano, and the two partners were good at harmonizing on humorous songs. Gosden also taught Correll his numerous Negro dialects. The partners performed on radio as early as 1922. In 1925 Gosden and Correll were broadcasting from the Edgewater Beach Hotel in Chicago and received a nightly free dinner as their salary. The team also wrote show material for Chicago bandleader Paul Ash and recorded a few songs for the Victor label.

Later in 1925, the partners finally quit the Bren Company and were signed by WGN radio in Chicago as a singing act. WGN executive Ben McCanna came up with the novel idea that Gosden and Correll could create a serial comic drama based on the popular comic strip, "The Gumps." This well-known strip was based on the exploits of Andy Gump. In character, Gump was a little man who wanted desperately to be a big man and never made the grade. The strip is considered to be the first with a continuing story. The serial concept had never been tried on the new medium of commercial radio.

Gosden and Correll agreed to the project with hesitation. It was decided that the two would create characters that would speak in black dialect without any reference to the team of Gosden and Correll. If the show failed, the partners' reputation would not be harmed. In current events, the great migration of Southern blacks seeking their fortune in the industrial North was taking place. Chicago's South Side was now a vibrant African-American community. Capitalizing on this social phenomenon, Gosden and Correll now assumed the personae of "Sam 'n' Henry," two uneducated Southern black men seeking their fortune in Chicago. The story line was to be scripted by the partners but was still based loosely on the imaginary white family depicted in "The Gumps." At first the new daily program was broadcast secretly from the Drake Hotel instead of the studios of WGN to further protect the true identity of "Sam 'n' Henry."

Early scripts were rough and soon reverted to typical minstrel show material. However, the characters gradually took on very human personalities, and surprisingly the show was a success. Sam and Henry found work as meat packers and later worked at Montgomery Wards and even went into business as teamsters with a beat-up, broken down wagon and an old horse named "Gram'pa." Another secondary character also emerged, "The Most Precious Diamond," who was the huckster leader of the fraternal order, "The Jewels of the Crown." Gosden and Correll approached WGN about distributing the popular show on records for broadcast by other radio stations and were turned down. The partners left WGN over this matter and were quickly signed by rival Chicago station, WMAQ. One problem, however, remained: WGN owned the rights to the "Sam 'n' Henry" name.

Correll and Gosden as guests of an African-American civic group, early in 1929. Before signing Correll and Gosden in 1928, the Chicago Daily News investigated how the performers were viewed by leaders in the city's black community, commissioning a survey of

members of the Chicago Urban League which found widespread approval. The performers actively cultivated the support of Chicago's black community during their years in that city.

1. The duo resumed broadcasting on WMAQ in March of 1928 as "Jim and Charlie." The names didn't seem to work. By episode five they had changed their names to "Amos 'n' Andy," and an institution was born. WMAQ also agreed to circulate the show on recorded discs around the nation. This became known as the "chainless chain" and is now known as syndication, another first for emerging geniuses of broadcasting.

The management of WMAQ was astute enough to realize that the new show would fail without the support of Chicago's black community and listened to influential individuals from this area. It was discovered that most black leaders approved highly of the dignified manner in which Gosden and Correll's fictional black characters were portrayed. The Chicago Urban League supported the new program, also. Gosden and Correll would frequently throw their support behind African-American charities in the years to come. The duo made numerous appearances at black social events during the '30s and even served as grand marshals in parades on the South Side.

As the saga of "Amos 'n' Andy" unfolded, Amos Jones and Andrew H. Brown were farm-hands outside of Atlanta. Dissatisfied with their lot, the two friends boarded the train seeking a new life in Chicago with \$24 and four ham and cheese sandwiches as their only assets. The character of Andy, played by Correll, exuded a sort of false confidence, covering real feelings of inferiority and inadequacy. Amos, played by Gosden, was usually a gentle, hardworking soul who was not easily impressed with get-rich-quick schemes like his pal Andy. While in Chicago, Amos and Andy were helped in their struggles by a new friend Sylvester, who was based on Gosden's childhood companion, Garrett Brown. Soon Amos and Andy were entrepreneurs, the proud owners of the "Fresh Air Taxi Company of America, Incorporated." Another strong character also soon emerged, George Stevens, better known as "The Kingfish." "The Kingfish" was basically the same character as "The Most Precious Diamond" in "Sam 'n' Henry." Gosden also played the part of "Kingfish." The title "Kingfish" referred to his title as leader of that "great fraternity, The Mystic Knights of the Sea." Kingfish sought solace at the lodge hall away from his troubled marriage. He could be a schemer and huckster, but he also aided his Brothers in times of crisis.

"Amos 'n' Andy" was broadcast live six days a week in fifteen-minute segments and became increasingly popular. In 1929 negotiations were underway for a network contract. CBS turned the program down. NBC was interested but wanted to change the show's minimal format by making it more of a minstrel show. Gosden and Correll steadfastly refused. They liked writing their own stories with Gosden dictating the story line to Correll. Correll usually recorded the script in shorthand and then transcribed all the parts on a typewriter complete with a carbon copy. At the broadcast, the two sat virtually alone reading their parts intently without a rehearsal, watching a stopwatch on the table. There was no director and no sound effects man. Gosden and Correll did all the voices and effects. The results, far from being sloppy, produced a highly emotional, funny, and realistic program.

NBC agreed to Gosden and Correll's terms with one slight change; an opening and closing theme played by a string orchestra was added. The selection was a teary, nostalgic melody, "The Perfect Song" taken from the musical score of the silent film classic, *The Birth of a Nation*. As a network program, "Amos 'n' Andy" was a "hit of hits." As the nation fell into the pangs of the Great Depression, the saga of the plucky duo lifted many souls. At the show's peak

around 1930, the listening audience was estimated at 40,000,000 listeners or about one third of the entire U.S. population. Utility companies noticed that demand for water and telephone use dropped significantly during the nightly "Amos 'n' Andy" broadcast. Gosden and Correll were invited to the White House and congratulated for their efforts by President Herbert Hoover. Still basically "country boys," the partners were overwhelmed at their incredible success. It had only been five years since they had literally been "singing for their supper." After going network, "Amos on' Andy" set their stories in New York. In reality, Gosden and Correll were still working out of WMAQ in Chicago. Although often remembered as a comedy show, "Amos 'n' Andy" 's outstanding moments of the 1930s were for the most part those of pathos. The shy Amos' romance with Ruby Taylor brought the country to a hush as Ruby almost died of pneumonia in 1935. The couple wed on Christmas Day of 1935, and their daughter Arbedella was born in October of 1936.

Amos began reading "The Lord's Prayer" to his daughter Arbedella on Christmas Eve of 1940. This tender moment was broadcast every Christmas Eve for the next fourteen years. Freeman Gosden, Jr., recalled that his father would come home after this annual broadcast and listen to the recording of Amos' recitation for hours in tears.

Andy had his moments, too. Andy was engaged to a woman with a reputation, the charming beautician, Madam Queen. As usual, Andy had overstated his financial position in the Taxi Cab Company and Lunchroom operation. This resulted in Andy getting "cold feet" and the postponement of his forthcoming marriage. Sued for "breach of promise," Andy, as well as most of the nation, was relieved when it was revealed that Madam Queen was never divorced from her second husband, who was still alive.

The Kingfish had his day, also. His "Home Bank" scheme was his own personal investment plan by which the depositors' money was invested in horse race bets. The story was a brilliant satire of the high times of the 1920s.

Before FDR's inauguration in 1933, Amos asked all his listeners to pray for the incoming president. Gosden and Correll were later invited to meet with the President. Both President and Mrs. Roosevelt were great "Amos 'n' Andy" fans and appreciated the support that the program had given to the new administration. policies of the



A key emotional moment in the definition of Amos' and Andy's relationship-Amos' breakdown and Andy's remorseful apology for his constant badgering, as heard in Episode 27, 4/24/28-depicted by illustrator, Margery Stocking. This pen-and-ink drawing was created in 1931 for Here They Are-Amos 'n' Andy, a hardcover collection of early scripts from the series published by Long and Smith of New York.

1. Much of the mystique of "Amos 'n' Andy" was that the characters had the illusion of being real people. Gosden and Correll did make appearances in blackface as their alter egos in the late '20s in typical old-time minstrel show makeup. In 1930 the team appeared in a Paramount film, Check and Double Check, in much more realistic makeup. Except for a cameo movie appearance in 1936, "Amos On' Andy" never appeared in costume and makeup again. NBC also refused to circulate real photographs of Gosden and Correll to the press or fans. Announcer Bill Hay also added to the mystery by introducing the characters at the beginning of the program as "Amos 'n' Andy in person" without ever giving the names of Gosden and Correll.

By 1943 "Amos 'n' Andy" had logged in over 4,000 broadcasts, most of which were never recorded. The daily show had taken its toll on the personal lives of Gosden and Correll, who both, coincidentally, had married in 1927. Ratings for the program had also dropped off. It was announced that "Amos 'n' Andy" was going off the air. A New York Times editorial urged the team to make a comeback.

"Amos 'n' Andy" soon reappeared in a thirty-minute weekly show before a live audience. Now billed as the "Amos 'n' Andy Show," the series began with new writers and was similar to the old program. However, there was now a supporting cast and frequent guest stars. Keeping with the times, the pace of the show picked up, and it became an extremely funny situation comedy with many good gags. Amos soon became a secondary character, and The Kingfish and Andy now dominated the story line. The weekly program was recorded and is the version of "Amos 'n' Andy" that the public generally remembers. It was no longer the sweet, methodical, philosophic program of the '30s. To some "Amos 'n' Andy" devotees, the new program was only a glimmer of its former self.

In 1948 Gosden and Correll sold the broadcast rights to "Amos 'n' Andy" to CBS television. A nearly four-year search was made to assemble an all Negro cast for the series. The cast included legendary, black comic, Tim Moore, as "The Kingfish." The television show was based on the thirty-minute version of the "Amos 'n' Andy" radio show and premiered in 1951. Although the show was a solid hit, rating 13th in popularity, the NAACP pronounced that the show was an insult to blacks showing stereotypes of blacks as lazy, stupid, and crooked. CBS halted production of "The Amos 'n' Andy Show" in 1953 after 78 episodes were filmed. The show continued in reruns as a favorite in many markets until being withdrawn in 1966. The buffoonery of The Kingfish and Andy aside, the show had a definite middle class feel to it, with most of the cast appearing in dress clothing and supporting characters depicting African-Americans as professional men and women. Many comedy buffs consider "The Amos 'n' Andy" television program to be one of the top TV comedies of all time on a par with "I Love Lucy." The show is now available only on bootleg copies formatted for home video and DVD formats.

It must be remembered that the NAACP only condemned the "Amos 'n' Andy" TV show. The radio program was still the number one show in U.S. radio from 1951 to 1953. Radio at this

time was being eclipsed by television, and even "Amos 'n' Andy" could not survive forever. The thirty minute weekly show, now aired on CBS, was dropped in 1955 to be replaced by the scaled down "Amos 'n' Andy Music Hall." The legendary duo now was relegated to playing records sandwiched between comic sketches with canned laughter. The last curtain was finally drawn on "Amos 'n' Andy" on November 25, 1960, after 32 years on the air. Gosden and Correll teamed up again in 1961 for the unsuccessful cartoon show, "Calvin and the Colonel." The show featured the voices of the old "Amos 'n' Andy" characters as animals. The poor animation contributed to the show's quick demise.

Although the careers of Gosden and Correll were now over, the two remained friends to the end. Correll died in 1972 and Gosden in 1981. Unlike other comedy teams, Gosden and Correll never even considered splitting up.

Both men were Masons. Charles Correll belonged to Trio Lodge No. 57 in Chicago, and Freeman Gosden belonged to Petersburg Lodge No. 15 in Petersburg, Virginia. In his later years, Gosden was a golfing buddy of former President Dwight D. Eisenhower and helped raise funds for the Eisenhower Medical Center in Palm Springs. Commenting on his long association with Charles Correll, Gosden remarked, "We were partners for 37 years and friends for 50. During all that time, we never exchanged an unkind word."

Both men were deeply saddened by the racial stigma, primarily from the fracas over the "Amos 'n' Andy" television show, which became unfairly associated with their own celebrated radio program. Freeman Gosden had once commented, "Both Charlie and I have deep respect for the black man. We felt our show helped characterize Negroes as interesting and dignified human beings."

Announcer Bill Hays perhaps revealed the best description of the true character of "Amos 'n' Andy" in this excerpt from 1930: "It has been my privilege for several years to sit in the studio with the boys as they broadcast their nightly episodes. I have seen them overcome with laughter at the antics of their characters; I have seen them broadcast a pathetic episode with tears in their eyes, drying them as fast as they could so that they might see the next lines of the script. Many times I have seen them so shaken by a pathetic episode that it took them half an hour to 'come to' sufficiently to be able to leave the studio to meet people. They 'live' the characters they portray; that's why they are so real and human...Nearly everyone, high or low, in city or isolated farm, black or white, who follows the antics of Amos en' Andy, enjoys them wholeheartedly."

This article was based on internet sources such as "Amos en' Andy Examined" and "Amos 'n' Andy by Elizabeth McLeod." Readers are encouraged to go to [Old Time Radio Fans.com](http://OldTimeRadioFans.com) to listen to a rare recording of the duo's 1939 program, "Andy Shot in the Arm." The show includes teary organ theme music and introduction and a Campbell's Soup commercial by Scottish announcer, Bill Hay.

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March 3, 1930: Correll and Gosden on the steps of the White House in matching overcoats and Homburg hats, preparing to meet President Hoover. The performers sat awestruck for more than an hour, while the President regaled them with his own favorite jokes. The expressions of bewildered excitement are genuine. Journalist O. O. McIntyre wrote of the partners, "Indeed they were-and still are-two saucer-eyed country boys who may be found at the forks of any creek, plowing and dreaming of some day becoming big-city chiropractors. They are the sort who look up at high buildings, wear buttoned shoes and finger-rings around their neckties, and you feel certain they would answer the first call of a stage hypnotist for volunteers."