

Contemporary Collectibles: Radio's sudsy serials

by *Linda_Rosenkrantz*

Just the names alone - "Pepper Young's Family," "Ma Perkins," "Young Widder Brown," "Mary Noble, Backstage Wife," "John's Other Life," "The Romance of Helen Trent," "Bachelor's Children," "Life Can Be Beautiful" - are enough to tell you that these were relics of a long-past time - the Golden Age of radio.

These were the seminal daily daytime soap operas (so called because so many of their sponsors, such as Procter & Gamble and Lever Brothers, were selling soaps and detergents), most of them lasting 15 minutes, that entertained housewives during the 1930s and 1940s as they swept and dusted and mopped and ironed.

The person generally given credit for originating the form is Irna Phillips, creator (and originally the star) of "Painted Dreams" in 1930, heard locally over WGN in Chicago. Phillips, later dubbed "The Grand Lady of Soap Opera," went on to have an extremely long career in the genre, stretching into the TV era, where three of her soaps, "As the World Turns," "The Guiding Light" and "Days of Our Lives," continued to flourish.

The first national show was either "Clara, Lu 'n' Em", a story of three small-town gossips, originally conceived by three Northwestern University coeds for the amusement of their sorority sisters, or "Betty and Bob," about a young married couple and their domineering mother-in-law, created by Frank and Anne Hummert for NBC radio in 1932. The genre grew and flourished until, by the spring of 1941, a women-oriented serial could be heard during all but 15 minutes between the hours of 10 in the morning and 6 p.m. They continued in the quarter-hour format until 1956, when the first half-hour program debuted.

The kinds of sentimental, convoluted, sometimes-melodramatic, cliff-hanging plot lines are reflected in some of the shows' opening intros: "Can a girl from a mining town out West find happiness as the wife of a wealthy and titled Englishman?" ("Our Gal Sunday"); "The story of a woman who sets out to prove that romance can live on at 35 - and even beyond" ("The Romance of Helen Trent"); "The story of the age-old conflict between a mother's duty and a woman's heart" ("Young Widder Brown"); and "The tender human story of young married love, dedicated to everyone who has ever been in love" ("When a Girl Marries").

The plots - and fictional small towns with names like Pine Valley and Three Oaks - were peopled with such period types as the village barber/judge/doctor/postmaster/busybody, the big-city newspaperman, the eager newlywed, the noble widder, the wise, elderly aunt and the sage paterfamilias.

As the power of daytime radio drama faded in the 1950s and TV took its place, there was one survivor. "The Guiding Light," which debuted on the airwaves in 1937, sponsored by Duz detergent and Pang-o soap, is still running on television today, 71 years later.

COLLECTIBLES

Unlike the late-afternoon, early evening series aimed at young boys that provoked a barrage of decoder rings and other giveaways, there is a limited amount of radio soap opera memorabilia. Some sponsors did issue books about their programs: Pillsbury offered a "Today's Children Family Album" and Old Dutch Cleanser a booklet on "Bachelor's Children." There was also a hardback featuring "Today's Children" as well as sheet music for the "Today's Children" song that included "Mother Moran's Recipe for a Happy Married Life" plus a wedding cake recipe.

In addition: several Aunt Jenny's recipe books and her Complete Birthday Kit, and cake knives; "Clara, Lu 'n' Em" puzzles, membership certificates for their Ladies Liberty Order and a newspaper, "The Ladies Clarion Blast," and two brass items from "The Romance of Helen Trent:" a mechanical badge and a silvered brass medallion.

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