

Contemporary Collectibles: Charlie McCarthy was no dummy

by *Linda_Rosenkrantz*

With the possible exception of Pinocchio, Charlie McCarthy was and remains the most famous wooden character in pop culture history. The elegantly attired, top-hatted and tuxedoed, wisecracking ventriloquist's dummy manipulated by Edgar Bergen had a unique career spanning 56 years, moving from vaudeville to radio where he was one of the biggest stars of all time to movies to television to night clubs.

Interested in magic as a child, Bergen purchased a book on ventriloquism for a 25 cents and began training himself in "voice diffusion." While still in high school, not satisfied with a store-bought dummy, he sketched the kind of head he had in mind modeled after a tough, local Irish newspaper boy and commissioned a Chicago carpenter named Theodore Mack to carve it out of white pine, while Bergen himself constructed the body. The name Bergen gave to the dummy was a combination of those of the newsboy (Charlie) and the carver (lengthened to McCarthy). Bergen continued to practice and perfect his skills, to the delight of his schoolmates and teachers.

His first professional performances were in vaudeville, while he also appeared in a few early one-reel movie shorts. His act was seen at a party for Noel Coward, who recommended him for an engagement at New York's famous Rainbow Room, where it was seen by two producers who booked it for a guest appearance on Rudy Vallee's radio show, by which time two other colorful characters, the dimwitted bumpkin Mortimer Snerd and the man-hungry Effie Klinker, had joined the cast. This appearance was so successful that Bergen and Charlie soon had their own show, called "The Chase and Sanborn Hour," which would air under various sponsors from Dec. 17, 1937 to July 1, 1956.

Charlie evolved into a complex character, part demanding child/teenager, part woman-chasing, cigarette-smoking playboy. Comic icon W.C. Fields appeared on the first 18 shows, and their insult exchanges were one of the major draws of the program. Their "feud" carried over to the big screen in a 1939 feature film called "You Can't Cheat an Honest Man." Other high-profile guests to appear on "The Chase and Sanborn Hour" included Mae West, Marlene Dietrich, Ginger Rogers, Clark Gable and almost every other star in Hollywood.

By 1939, it was estimated that "The Chase and Sanborn Hour" was heard in about one-third of the homes in the nation, the largest radio audience in the country. Charlie was so popular with both adults and children that it was inevitable that there would be an avalanche of character merchandise. Much of it, especially items made in the 1930s, is of considerable value on today's collectible market. (Even at the height of the Great Depression, these tie-ins were bringing in about \$75,000 a year).

One of the most desirable items is the Charlie McCarthy doll made in 1937 by the Effanbee Doll Co., with composition head, hands and feet, and a cloth body, as well as several other dolls and ventriloquist dummies. Other prime collectibles are an 8-inch tin wind-up toy called "The McCarthy Strut," the figure moving along as his mouth opens and closes, made by Louis Marx and Co.; and several novelty wind-up cars also made by Marx, complete with "whoopie action and spinning heads; and a 1938 radio with Charlie sitting nonchalantly

on its Bakelite case.

Some of other items include a 1938 premium game called Charlie McCarthy's Radio party, with cardboard cutouts of Charlie and Bergen, as well as program regulars Nelson Eddy, Don Ameche and Dorothy Lamour; another game called Charlie McCarthy's Game of Topper; and a card game, "Edgar Bergen's Charlie McCarthy Question and Answer Game." Other collectibles include Big Little Books, coloring, comics and paper dolls, and a picture book titled "A Day with Charlie McCarthy," published by Whitman, and promotional spoons and banks.

Linda Rosenkrantz has edited Auction magazine and authored 18 books, including "Cool Names for Babies" and "The Baby Name Bible" (St. Martin's Press).

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