

stations and small regional networks would then be used to expand ABS outward from there. ABS had hoped to purchase New York's WMCA (570 kHz, 500 watts) as its flagship station and the crown jewel of the chain. The owners wouldn't sell, and ABS had to buy 250 watt WCDA on 1350 kHz, which was not as desirable a frequency as WMCA's channel. Moreover, WCDA shared time on 1350 kHz with several other area stations, and ABS had to buy them, too. Stations WBNX and WMSG decided to sell to ABS, but religious station WAWZ refused. WCDA, WMSG, and WBNX were then consolidated under the single ABS callsign WBNX. The calls WYNN, WFDR, and WMET were considered, but decided against.

Wynn was the President of ABS. Chairman of the Board was Curtis B. Dall, son-in-law of President Franklin D. Roosevelt. The royal fiddler, Ota Gygi, was the Vice President of ABS. Former banker Graham Adams became the ABS Secretary. The Treasurer was Nelson B. Grove, formerly of the Seaboard National Bank. The General Manager was Harry Goldman, former owner of WMSG.

The ABS offices were installed at fashionable 501 Madison Avenue, in New York City, directly across from CBS. Modernistic blue, green, and orange offices were built, seven studios equipped. Gygi put together a staff that worked through the night planning and arranging ABS, living on rations of coffee and sandwiches, and working for salaries far below those being paid to employees of CBS and NBC. At one point, ABS had run up a coffee and sandwich tab of \$300 at the luncheonette in the building's lobby.

The original ABS stations to kick off the chain's operations were called the Atlantic Seaboard Network. These six stations were WBNX in New York, WTNJ in Trenton, NJ; WPEN in Philadelphia; WDEL in Wilmington; WCBM in Baltimore; and WOL in Washington. Other stations in New York, New Jersey, and in parts of New England affiliated soon after, for a total of sixteen affiliates prior to ABS beginning its broadcasts. Wynn claimed that he could have had a coast-to-coast chain right from the start, and that he could sign up any stations of his choice, but he chose to start out slowly. Plans were to feed the programs out to network affiliates over Western Union lines because they cost less to use than AT&T lines.

Big Business

The ABS relationship with its affiliated stations was quite different than that of either NBC or CBS to their affiliates, as was the ABS strict limitations against lengthy commercials at the beginning and end of programs. Wynn said that he signed up hundreds of actors to appear in quality programs, and if affiliates didn't like the programs after a one month trial period, they



Caricature of Ed Wynn in his popular role as NBC Radio's "Texaco Fire Chief." Ultimately, Wynn appeared to panic when faced with the reality of making the choice of giving up starring in his popular NBC show for the opportunity to head a problem-ridden "third network."

could withdraw from ABS. At least fifteen hours of programming per day was guaranteed, with thirty major features available for sponsorship.

Within the broadcasting industry, there were uncomfortable rumblings that none of the ABS executives seemed to have any working knowledge of broadcasting or network operations. They cited the fact that no less than seven tentative ABS starting dates had been announced then skipped over. One ABS exec brought suit against both Wynn and Ota Gygi to get the network functioning. Station WPEN eventually announced that it was no longer connected in any way with the ABS operation.

Maybe the worst thing that could have happened to ABS was when Wynn had to go to Hollywood to begin shooting a film, *The Chief*. Wynn had originally thought ABS would be operational by mid-February, and that he'd be able to split for Hollywood by July and leave it perking along under its own inertia. He had no choice but to go, his contract with MGM required him to be there in July. The question was, with ABS not yet on the air and facing many problems, what would happen without Wynn's presence, guidance, personal attention, inspiration, drive, and assurances to those who were getting nervous.

The answer was in the hands of Wynn's partner, Ota Gygi. Unfortunately, he didn't have that answer, despite the use of a direct wire between Gygi's office in New York and Wynn's dressing room at the MGM studios. Wynn was unable to devote sufficient time to adequately answering Gygi's questions, motivating him, or watching what was taking place at ABS. In short order, Gygi man-

aged to anger the radio critics of all the influential New York tabloid newspapers.

The Big Big Broadcast

When it came time for ABS to finally go on the air with their gala inaugural four-hour broadcast on September 25th, Wynn was still 3,000 miles away and couldn't even appear at the ABS microphones! Furthermore, the wrath of New York's most important radio critics was still in evidence.

Wynn's "voice" was heard on the ABS inaugural program, thanks to the efforts of a professional voice mimic. Wynn was supposedly listening to all of this over the special direct line to California, but later he confessed that he was busy working on his movie at the time and wasn't listening. The ABS gala was filled with live musical numbers played by the studio orchestra, plus tributes to ABS from various notables, and stations that had sent congratulatory telegrams. One telegram was read from ABS affiliate WTNJ, although for some odd reason, that station didn't even carry the ABS inaugural broadcast.

ABS' large broadcast studio could accommodate 1,000 people, so ABS sent 5,000 invitations to celebrities and to lots of others whom ABS felt might be interested in either advertising or buying stock. They probably figured that if one out of every five invitations produced a warm body, they'd fill the studio very nicely. When most of the 5,000 showed up at 8 p.m. for the inaugural event, there was pandemonium. Thousands jammed into the building lobby, drinking beer, eating salami sandwiches, spotting celebrities, and waiting for their turn to get into the studios. The crowd poured out into the street, some in tuxedos, others in work clothes; men, women, and children blended into a shoving, pushing, shouting, and impatient mass of humanity that was beyond the ability of the police to control even to the extent that a clear path between the curb and building entrance could be maintained.

Jumbo-sized Kate Smith showed up and tried to get through. The crowd and the heat of the summer night almost caused her to pass out. Another singer, Vaughn de Leath, who weighed-in above 250 lbs. actually did faint dead away when struggling to get from the street into the ABS studios.

The crowd, including those in the studio, was getting louder and nastier, and could easily be heard over the ABS microphones. As dignified announcer Norman Broken-shire pleaded with the crowd for quiet and some semblance of order, a glass studio door was heard crashing, someone screamed, hungry guests could be heard fighting with ABS security guards.

Luckily, several remotes had been planned and ABS was able to cut away from the noisy scene going on at ABS headquarters. The evening's broadcast ended just before midnight with a few unexpected words from