

ABS, The Final Chapter

With Wynn gone, and ABS never having signed up any sponsors nor running even one single minute of commercially sponsored programming, things went into a panic mode. General Manager Goldman temporarily took charge, while Vice President Gygi ran around trying to locate another celebrity to replace Ed Wynn. Other broadcasters were approached to aid ABS in its moment of need, although without success. This included John T. Adams, President of the Federal Broadcasting Corp., and Donald Flamm, President of the Knickerbocker Broadcasting Corp. Both said they had refused because they "never had been interested in what ABS did, or has done."

From within the walls of ABS, word leaked out that even before Wynn's resignation, ABS' Board Chairman Dall, and Secretary Adams had quit.

ABS was in turmoil and despair. At midnight on November 1, 1933 when the engineer threw the switch that ended the day's broadcasting, he also ended ABS itself. The network's on-the-air existence had lasted about a month.

The next morning, ABS employees appeared and angrily demanded their salaries. Ota Gygi stood on a desk and, instead, offered them a long and tearful lecture on corporate finances and how it would be bad for them to let their anger over unpaid salaries topple ABS into bankruptcy. He said that ABS owed *him* more money than it owed any of them, but that he was "completely certain that not only the company, but the interests of our creditors may be saved if I am permitted to proceed along my own lines."

Although Gygi ordered the staff to go home, they solemnly filed out of the meeting room to mill about the offices and reminisce, complain, and talk about looking for new jobs. After an hour or so they began to leave, the lights were shut off, and all that remained were abandoned offices and studios.

Within a few days, three major ABS creditors banded together and forced the network into involuntary bankruptcy. A financial evaluation at the time revealed that ABS had \$50,000 tied up in furniture and technical equipment; \$28,000 in general liabilities; and \$10,000 owed in salaries.

The creditors sought relief along three avenues: 1) they wanted to obtain from Ed Wynn a waiver for an alleged claim against ABS amounting to more than \$100,000; 2) They wanted to persuade Wynn to pay the employees; 3) They hoped to sell ABS in order to pay the creditors.

Ed Wynn's son, actor Keenan Wynn, recalled in a 1959 interview that the ABS affair had cost his father "305,000 Depression dollars" and that "he paid it all." For all of Ed Wynn's good intentions, and his immense talents and personal popularity at the time, Wynn was left to pick up all of the pieces after the ABS Humpty Dumpty fell. The ABS

disaster, followed closely by several other career and business reverses, took its toll on Wynn. Within only a few years, he had a nervous breakdown, and found his career virtually non-existent.

Trooper that he was, Wynn went into TV and won one of that medium's first Emmy Awards (1949), and in 1959 he was nominated for an Oscar (best Supporting Actor) for his dramatic role in *The Diary of Anne Frank*. He passed away in 1966 at age 80, fondly remembered by all who had ever seen him perform in a career that spanned 65 years, and had incorporated work in both comedy and serious drama. Few others had experienced such heights of success, hit such depths of failure, nor been able to bounce back with such tenacity.

For every celebrity backed commercial success like Arthur Treacher's Fish and Chips, or Paul Newman's salad dressing, there are probably two dozen flops like *Billy Beer*, or the 1940's soda called *The Joe Louis Punch*, or Ed Wynn's *Amalgamated*

Broadcasting System. Ultimately, the trained bear probably had good intuition, and Wynn was at least smart enough to get out when he did.

Thanks

The author would like to acknowledge the expertise and considerable research on ABS done by Michael Biel, Ph.D., Associate Professor, Radio-TV, Morehouse State University, Morehead, KY. In 1983, at the Annual Convention of the Popular Culture Association, Dr. Biel presented a talk about ABS, illustrated with excerpts from actual recordings of the ABS inaugural broadcast. Throughout the foregoing feature, I have made extensive use of Dr. Biel's fascinating and very thorough research into the life and death of the ABS.

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