

# WJSV (Washington, D.C.) (Complete day of radio broadcasting) (September 21, 1939)

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Essay by Cary O'Dell



*"The Goldbergs"*



*Arthur Godfrey*



*Joe E. Brown*

Radio station WJSV, now WTOP in Washington, DC, has had a long and sometimes checkered history.

The station, then bearing the call letters WTRC, signed on the air for the first time from Brooklyn, New York, on September 25, 1926. It was founded by The Twentieth (District) Republican Club, which was actually something of a front for the Ku Klux Klan.

Eventually, under pressure from local politicians, WTRC was forced out of New York City. In 1927, it relocated to Mount Vernon Hills, Virginia, and changed its call letters to WTFF.

Still, though its locale and call letters changed, little else did. Its new call letters, WTFF, stood for "The Fellowship Forum," the name of the KKK's leading newspaper. And its new owner, John S. Vance (who, in 1929, would go on to change the call letters again, this time to his own initials, WJSV) held the title of Grand Wizard within the KKK organization.

For a few years, billing itself as an "independent voice from the heart of the nation," WJSV broadcast at 10,000 watts into the northern Virginia and Washington, DC, area.

In 1932, though, Klan involvement with the station finally ended when the station was purchased by the Columbia Broadcasting Service (CBS) as its newest network affiliate and its primary station in the DC area. Though now under CBS ownership, the station did not however undergo another change in call letters. The station would remain WJSV which many listeners believed stood for "Jesus Saves Virginia," a confusion the station did little to clear up.

Since the WJSV was now a CBS O&O (owned and operated), the majority of programs carried over its air were CBS-produced fodder including its midday and afternoon slate of soap operas and its evening comedies and variety efforts. The station would also move its broadcast facility from Virginia into Washington, DC, proper, into the Earle Building located at the corner of 13<sup>th</sup> and E Street in downtown DC.

The day September 21, 1939, over WJSV, was not, necessarily, an exceptional or important day; it was just a "typical" Thursday in the station's broadcast week. But it does have the distinction of not only being the only extant full recorded day for the station but, in fact, the only extant fully recorded broadcast day for any radio station during this era of terrestrial broadcasting.

According to RadioArchives.com, the idea to record this day in its entirety came from a conversation between station manager Harry Butcher and an employee of the National Archives,

R.D.W. Connor. The conversation itself was a follow-up to previous discussions about the need to preserve radio broadcasts.

The resulting recordings of 9/21/39—sign-on to sign-off, 6:00am to 1:00am--filled up 38 16" double-sided discs.

It's a jam-packed day to be sure. As most shows at that time only lasted 15 minutes, over 40 different programs are heard during that single broadcast day. In terms of genres, they run the gamut from the aforementioned soaps and quiz programs to news to sports coverage and comedy.

At the 6am sign-on, an officious male voice kicks off the broadcast day announcing the time, the station's call letters and its CBS affiliation. Some soothing big band music then commences--a good enough way to start the morning. At 6:30am, the deep-voiced Arthur Godfrey takes to the mike. He's folksy and mentions the boy scouts selling tickets to an upcoming amateur boxing match and a local boat that's up for sale; it's a real "honey," according to him. More music follows. Godfrey's show, "Sundial," moseys beautifully. It's two hours of laid-back music and musings (plus commercials) before—like the latter-day TV "Today" show--broadcaster Joe King comes on with the morning's headlines. King then turns the airwaves back over to Godfrey who puts on a transcription disc of "Certified Magic Carpet," a quiz show where a series of female contestants answer questions. Right answers earn them a loaf of Certified bread(!).

After Godfrey returns for a moment, WJSV begins its daily slate of soap operas. Drama comes early to the station: the serial "Bachelor's Children," sponsored by Old Dutch Cleanser, gets underway at 8:45am. The now clichéd strains of organ music swells the air before "Bachelor's" classic characters come on. On this episode of "Bachelor's," some legislation pertaining to a local sanitarium dominates the dramas tracing the travails of Dr. Bob Graham and his immediate circle.

Other soaps, all 15 minutes in length, soon follow: "Pretty Kitty Kelly," "The Story of Myrt and Marge," "Hilltop House," "Big Sister," "Aunt Jenny's True Life Stories," "When a Girl Marries," "The Goldbergs," "The Romance of Helen Trent," "and "Our Gal Sunday," among others. All totaled, 18 daytime dramas are heard during the course of this broadcast day. The high number of soaps presented on the schedule underscores what an important, dominate genre this was on radio at the time and what a sought-after audience women must have been.

The only break from the pathos comes at 10am when Bob Trout comes on with a news break and "Mary Lee Taylor" arrives immediately after to offer a recipe housewives can make at home (stuffed vanilla wafers on this day).

Afternoon programming is a little more diverse. Most notable are several news and public affairs programs including the "Sunshine Report" at 1pm which reports the assassination of Romanian premier Armand Calinescu by the pro-Nazi Iron Guard. Forty-five minutes later, the station preempts two of its programs for a special address by President Roosevelt to a joint-session of Congress on the topic of America's neutrality in relation to the quickly escalating war in Europe.

The happenstance of a Presidential address occurring on this randomly-selected, fully-recorded day is interesting. It's indicative of the not-so-surprising dependency America had on radio at that time for getting up-to-the-minute information. It's also illustrative of the state of the world—or, at least, Europe—at that time: major news was emerging on a daily, even perhaps an hourly, basis.

Music, sports and comedy fill much of the afternoon schedule. "Rhythm and Romance" offers soft swing before the afternoon game between the Cleveland Indians and the Washington Senators is joined in progress in the 4<sup>th</sup> inning. It's the last game of the season. It's also "Lady's Day" in the park and, as noted by the announcer, several of the "fairer sex" are seated in the stands. Former Senators pitcher and later Baseball Hall of Famer Walter Johnson provides some of the game's play-by-play.

Listeners get to laugh later, after the game ends, with episodes of “Amos ‘n’ Andy” and “Joe E. Brown.” Primetime—7pm—is kicked off with the quiz program “Ask-It Basket.” Followed by true stories dramatized on “Strange As It Seems” and then the hour long “Major Bowes’ Original Amateur Hour” (the “Gong Show”/“American Idol”/“America’s Got Talent” of its day). This installment of “Hour” includes an animal impressionist, a whistling virtuoso, a set of yodeling sisters, various other singers and even a tap dancer!

More high-brow fare arrives with the airing of “The Columbia Workshop,” one of radio’s most respected anthologies right after. This evening’s half-hour play is a comedy titled “Now It’s Summer” and tells the tale of a stodgy physics teacher who learns to live a little.

Ten o’clock brings us another news recap by Edwin C. Hill followed later by commentary by news analyst Albert Warner. The day concludes with various music shows including performances by the orchestras of Louis Prima and Bob Chester.

Sign-off occurs at 1am.

The station’s full schedule for September 21<sup>st</sup> of 1939, as well as listening samples, can be found at: <http://xroads.virginia.edu/~1930s2/radio/day/radio.html>

Interestingly, though the station stopped its broadcasting for the day at 1am, that didn’t mean that station’s building itself would be empty or unmanned. Since WJSV’s signal was capable of reaching the entire East Coast, it had been designated by the FCC as an important link in the advent of a potential national emergency. That meant that the broadcast facility was staffed 24-hours a day, even after sign-off.

Today, WJSV is still on the air. It became WTOP in 1941, the same year it settled its AM frequency at 1500 kilohertz. Ownership has changed hands several times in the ensuing decades. As of this writing, WTOP is an FM station but still affiliated with CBS. Since 1969, its format has been all-news.

WJSV’s day-long document from 1939 is a fascinating one. In some ways, it is greater than the sum of its parts; it’s more than just some radio shows strung together. It truly is a time capsule, a window into the day-in-the-life of radio during its golden peak and a window into the days and evenings of America. Some of what one hears is heart-warming (the earnestness of the talent on “Major Bowes”); some is disturbing (some very dated, racist advertising for “shortnin’ bread”). Meanwhile, the soothing tones of Arthur Godfrey shows how he became such a welcome media presence, destined for a long career. And the carefully crafted soap episodes illustrate why so many of them often too endured for decades. Finally, the urgent news reports and FDR’s stirring oratory are perhaps the recording’s most compelling items—truly history as it happens.

Even with the presence of some major news events, for some, listening in or working at the station, September 21, 1939, as broadcast by WJSV, was just another day, as “ordinary” as could be. But the creation and endurance of these recordings—and what they have come to represent—shows us, as historians and sociologists, amateur or not, that, often, in radio (as in life), there is actually no such thing as an “ordinary day.”

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