



THE STORY OF
**MAJOR
BOWES**
AND HIS
AMATEURS



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"This Review of the work of Major Bowes appeared in The Etude, and is reprinted with the permission of the publisher, the Theodore Presser Company. The article was written by Dr. James Francis Cooke, Editor of The Etude and well-known American executive, educator and musician, under the nom de plume of Anthony J. Branson, and has attracted very wide attention."



THE STORY OF MAJOR BOWES AND HIS ORIGINAL

Amateur Hour

BY ANTHONY J. BRANSON



IF YOU HAVE ANY DOUBT in your mind as to the value of a personality, you need only look at the success of Major Edward Bowes, showman extraordinary, keen business executive, and the best "emsee" of the age. If you are not a pilgrim of the "Great White Way," or if you are not a subscriber to "Variety," or the "Billboard," you probably do not know what the noun "emsee," or the verb "to emsee," means. "Emsee" is simply post-depression jargon taken from the night club performers who are masters of ceremonies (M.C.). These, "we have with us tonight," and "give the little girl a great big hand," folks, who can unblushingly exaggerate a backwoods

prima donna into an "amazing arteest," were sired by the old-fashioned toastmasters and trained in the school of ballyhoo.

Major Bowes, of course, does his "emseeing" over the air, does it in a more dignified manner, and is extremely adroit in his field. For years before he introduced his Amateur Hour, he "emseed" his Sunday noon musical programs, from the famous New York Capitol Theater. In these programs he inserted little bits of homely philosophy and an occasional poem. The Major knew that the world is always short on sentiment, and he has made a real contribution to a mechanized age by his homely and sometimes tearful contributions. He published these very appealing and human poems in a book called "Verses I Like," and Theodore Roosevelt thought enough of them to write a very laudatory three page "Foreword" to the book. Unquestionably his scattering of the philosophy of kindness, tolerance and optimism has helped millions. But, if sentiment is a grace of the Irish mind, so is wit; and when the Major laughs and chuckles you can almost see the loud-speaker grin.

Almost everything to which Major Bowes has turned his hand has succeeded. He has won the favor of millions in all classes of human endeavor. Therefore, to the would-be footlight aspirant, the favor of the Major is looked upon as a kind of theatrical rabbit's foot. His success in his particular field, in which music has played a conspicuous part, is so startling that anything pertaining to it is of curious and profitable interest. As a showman, he is master of the art of pleasing people; and his "mike" technic is worthy of study.

Honors of many kinds have been accorded to Major Bowes for his service to humanity, and he is both a Doctor of Laws and Knight of Malta.

Biographical and Hereditary

MAJOR EDWARD BOWES was born in San Francisco, of Irish parents. He is one of those perpetually young people over fifty. Around the beginning of this century he had already established himself as a successful business man in San Francisco.

In his youth, young Bowes was moderately trained in music. The Major's first business enterprise (as a school boy), was that of writing calling cards, at a time when the art was mixed up with making fanciful pictures of birds. His handwriting is today such that he could return to his juvenile Spencerian undertaking. A job in a real estate office, at three dollars a week, determined the Major's career. He has always been in the real estate business on the side and has owned a vast amount of property. His rise was rocketlike. He became the best real estate operator in the city of "The Golden Gate." As

fortune favored him, he became interested in yachting, in a thoroughbred training stable, and in automobile racing. He once took the wheel and won a fifty mile non-stop race, in the days when every racing driver was a dare-devil. Life was an everlastingly new and exciting adventure for young Bowes, and he was continually upon the lookout for more thrills. This he found next in politics.

In 1904, San Francisco's municipal rule began to sink to new lows in American affairs. Corruption was a commonplace, and not since the days of the vigilants had the city government been such a national scandal. Here was a grand fight for an Irish-American heart! Major Bowes was appointed upon a Grand Jury, and, the more he learned of the depravity of the city, the more his anger soared. He soon found himself heading a reform movement with Hiram Johnson (later Governor Johnson and then Senator Johnson) as his attorney. Theodore Roosevelt became aware of the situation and, at Major Bowes' solicitation, sent the famous detective, William J. Burns, to his aid. Bowes knew that the greatest asset he could have was an aroused public sentiment, and he employed his publicity methods to tell the good people of the city of some of the dangers surrounding them. Part of his raid upon crime was devoted to a battle to end gambling and bribery, and part to the drug traffic. Major Bowes attacked these fearlessly, often going personally and single-handed into situations that would make a moving picture thriller. With him was the courageous District Attorney, Francis J. Heaney, who later



The night Major Edward Bowes was host to the men of Aberdeen Proving Ground the Three Bakers came with their wares. They proved the Army lived big, and Major Bowes confirmed it with a sample slice.

was shot down in open court. Ultimately the malefactors were put behind bars and San Francisco was placed upon a new civic basis.

When Nature Took a Hand

THIS WAS NOT THE ONLY EXCITING EVENT in Major Bowes' San Francisco days. After he had made a trip to Ireland to visit the birthplace of his parents, he returned upon the night of the momentous debut of Caruso in the San Francisco Opera House. The occasion was momentous indeed, because the applause for the great tenor had scarcely died out when the great earthquake and fire took place. The Major's fortune was largely in real estate, and his buildings were soon in ashes. While the embers were still white hot, he engaged workmen to erect an office building, with firmer foundations, on the site of his ruins. The Major was following the optimistic doctrine he had preached for years. By guessing right as to the location of his new building operations, he reestablished his fortune.

In 1903, Major Bowes married the famous actress, Margaret Illington; they moved to New York where Major Bowes acquired an interest in the Cort Theater (also the Park Square Theater in Boston); and he commenced producing plays. In 1918, he built the Capitol Theater on Broadway in New York, which at that time had the largest seating capacity of any modern playhouse. It was the first of the huge "Cinema Cathedrals" in New York City. There he instituted

Even the distaff side adheres to the military motif on Major Bowes' Amateur Program. The Clark Sisters came from Fargo, North Dakota, and since their appearance have busied themselves in the Major Bowes Units and with radio engagements.



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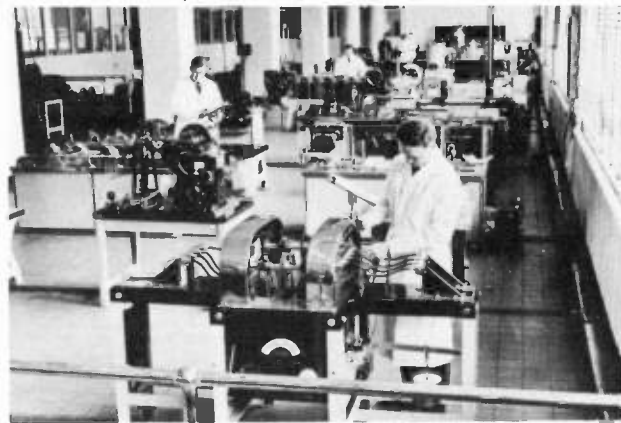
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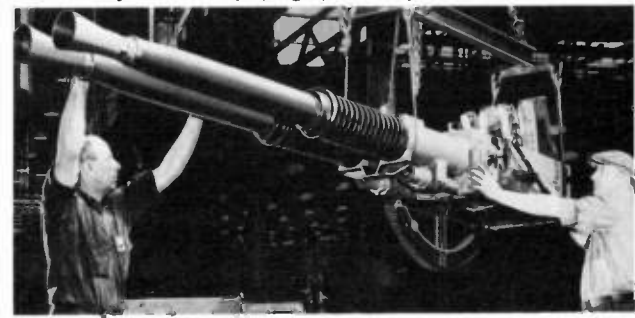
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**ROLL
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CHRYSLER CORPORATION FACTORIES IN WAR WORK

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Plymouth Lynch Road
Dodge
Dodge Truck

Dodge Forge
Dodge—Chicago
DeSoto
DeSoto—Warren

Chrysler—Jefferson
Chrysler—Kercheval
Highland Park
Marysville

Dearborn
Amplex
Airtemp—Dayton
Tank Arsenal

McKinstry Street
John R
Evansville, Indiana
Kokomo, Indiana

Newcastle, Indiana
Helena, Arkansas
San Leandro, California
Los Angeles, California

Whether the amateur hour on the radio came as an inspiration or as a carefully worked out plan, the Major has not told. The appeal of the idea is multifold.

First, there is the appeal to the performers, who feel that the program gives them an escape from oblivion provided by fate, dangling before them possibly immense financial returns.

Second, it affords to thousands a means of expressing themselves to the world and thus releasing pent-up ambitions.

Third, it puts the idea of a contest before the radio audience.

Fourth, it provides a varied and interesting program.

Fifth, it has a curious human appeal, in that the Major very cleverly introduces little personalities which range from burlesque to tragedy.

Sixth, it presents the always admirable picture of a human individual in a tense struggle to succeed; and the essence of drama is struggle.

Naturally this has brought myriads of all kinds of people to Major Bowes' doors. If you were to spend a day in his anteroom, you would be torn between laughter and tears. Only a comparatively few of those who enlist for auditions ever reach the theater of the ether. The others must be told to go home and try again, or that there is no chance whatsoever.

Grist from All Climes

THE MAJOR'S PROGRAMS include almost all kinds of human expression, from the scalp to the feet. Their audience is, therefore, almost universal. It is very doubtful, however, if these programs could succeed without the Major, who is the biggest part of the show. His reassuring voice and simple presentations are the Major's own inimitable brand and contribute enormously to the amusement of the hearers. Most of all, the writer feels, however, the first appeal of the program is in "Fate": "Who will Fate favor tonight?" The Major, in all probability, got his famous line from the Chinese sage, Confucius, who said "The Wheel of Fortune turns round incessantly and who can say to himself, 'I shall today be uppermost?'"

The uncertainty of destiny in an amateur program, the thing which has made thousands invest in the Irish Sweepstakes, is another form of the magnet of chance, which draws thousands of performers and listeners to the Amateur Hour. A man turns up from "nowhere," suddenly Fortune gives him his chance, and he is actually heard addressing the entire nation. Such a case was that of Harvey Mearns, a salesman for bakers' supplies in Philadelphia. He learned bell-ringing, musical rattles, the tubular harp and Javanese chimes. Major Bowes introduced him to Destiny on an Amateur Hour. He

a new form of musical, vaudeville, and moving picture entertainment, which has been widely imitated. In 1925 he started to broadcast a weekly "Major Bowes' Family" Program on Sunday, with a very humanistic personal musical appeal. The music was always of a very high order. This type of program led to the development of moving picture symphony orchestras in all parts of the country. The sound pictures put an end to many of the orchestras, but not to the Major's. He knew their value in bringing customers to the box office. The symphony orchestras in the movie theaters called for the expenditure of millions of dollars and did much to elevate musical taste in America. "Major Bowes' Family" Programs led to the development of a huge radio audience; and, when he came to start his Amateur Hour, he had little difficulty in enlisting the interest of millions.

Fate has played too big a part in the career of Major Bowes not to influence his interpretation of life. His familiar introductory line of his Amateur Program, "The Wheel of Fortune Spins—Around, around she goes, and where she stops nobody knows," is nowhere better illustrated than in the Major's own career. There have been amateur contests in vaudeville for four decades. Once the idea was so popular that the amateurs actually become professionals, making tours of the theaters and acting the roles of amateurs. This fraud was easily penetrated, and the public soon turned its back on amateur hours.



Major Bowes' staff visits a military base each week to supervise an Amateur show for the men. This is one contingent of instrumentalists, singers and novelty entertainers from Ft. George G. Mead.

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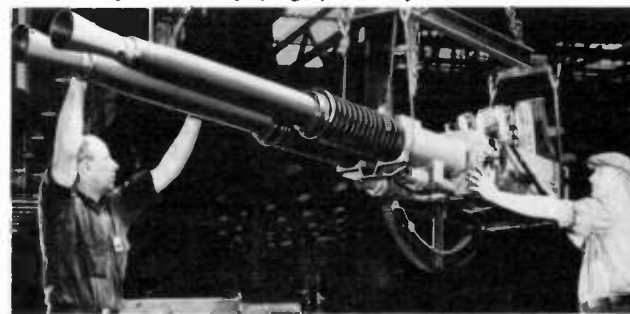
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made good and was immediately engaged for a tour with one of the Bowes' Theater Units. He saved his money, and, on returning to Philadelphia, found that his former employer was obliged to give up his business. Mearns bought it with his savings. Note, however, that if he had not had the opportunity presented by Major Bowes, he could not have grasped the opportunity which put him in a successful business. No wonder Lord Bacon said, "A wise man makes more opportunities than he finds."

Variety is one of the problems of the Major's programs. Anyone who ever has served as a judge in a musical contest knows how certain musical "war horses" keep continually tramping to the front. The Major has probably heard the *Prologo* from "I Pagliacci" and Victor Herbert's *Gypsy Love Song* enough times to give him blind staggers. Applicants with musical "fresh meat" of real interest to the general public must be as much of a thrill to the Major as they are to his listeners.

The Amateur Program is now in its eighth year. It started March 24, 1935. It is estimated that consideration has been given to over one hundred and ninety-six thousand applicants. This does not mean merely an audition, because nearly every applicant has a struggle story. Major Bowes and his staff have heard enough life romances to fill a thousand books. All this is important to the attractiveness of



The Victory Program was a special broadcast for the Treasury Department. Major Bowes presented Army, Navy and Coast Guard talent along with Christina Carroll and "Windy" Cook who were sensational in previous broadcasts.

the Amateur Program, because the greater the struggle, the greater the drama, and the greater the appeal to the audience.

A Theatrical Flair

THE AMATEUR PROGRAM of Major Bowes has the advantage of being presented before a real audience in a real theater. The building is a former Broadway playhouse, taken over for such purposes by The Columbia Broadcasting System. The seats are free, but passes must be secured in advance. The house is always "packed."

The audience, and its applause, then become part of the air show. The Major knows the value of this. The audience sees the performers and the effect of appearance and personality is unfailingly indicated. A tubby, spongy-nosed baritone from Askalulu, with a good voice but an impossible appearance, would not under these circumstances have the same appeal as a delightful young coloratura from the Mulberry Street Riviera, whose voice might not be top notch, but whose smile and manner carry a fortune. The Major is probably the only man in the theatrical field whose "try outs" are free. Like the automobile manufacturer, his product goes right from "the line" to the dealer and the consumer. The applause in the theater and over the air lets the manager who engages the Major Bowes' Units know what he is engaging. The plan is what the French term "*étonnant*



William F. Grimeson was rejected by the Navy because of a stiff finger. The youth had the digit amputated and was later accepted. A solemn occasion during a recent Major Bowes' Amateur Program was the swearing-in ceremony conducted during the broadcast. Lieutenant William G. Morrison, officer in charge of recruiting for the New York Area, officiated.

(astounding, marvelous)"; there never has been anything like it. The audiences in the theaters know that they at least will see performances that thousands have already approved.

Major Bowes has an uncanny sense of musical selectivity. That is, he knows a good thing when he sees it and hears it. It was Major Bowes who gave Erno Rapee his opportunity as a conductor. Later on Eugene Ormandy came to the orchestra as a violin player. Before long, he stepped up to the position of first violinist, then conductor of the Capitol Theater Orchestra, where he remained for years, then conductor of the Minneapolis Orchestra, then conductor of the Philadelphia Orchestra. The shrewd impresario had guessed right again.

Major Bowes, for obvious reasons, does not encourage amateurs to come to him from all over the country, but rather from the vicinity of New York. He does not feel that it is right to solicit applicants from a distance, because of the cost of transportation and the possible disappointment to those who do not pass the test of his auditions.

Where Enthusiasm Exudes

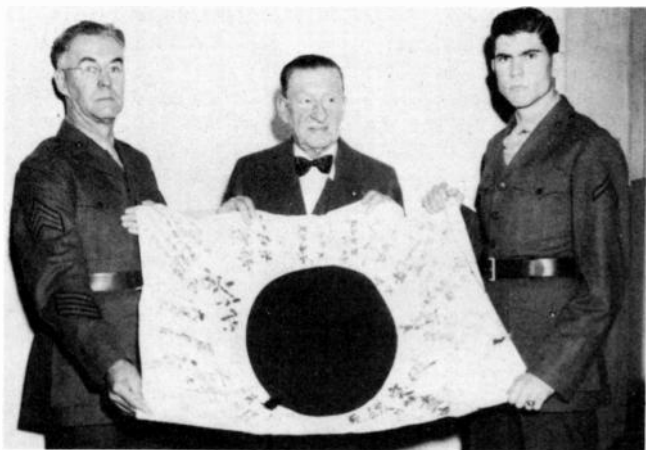
THE POPULARITY OF THE AMATEUR PROGRAM is almost incredible. Those who have visited the Chrysler Buildings in New York, and at the World's Fair, have seen something of the immense number of souvenirs, presents and "honors" which have poured in upon the Major from all over the world. Part of this museum of publicity is given over to police badges showered upon the Major from communities in all parts of the country. No Caribbean admiral could want for more. If the Major were to piece his police badges together, he would have a garment that would put to shame the armor that would have dazzled a knight of the Middle Ages.

The Major's "fan mail" represents appreciation almost unequaled by any other famous American. The records in the American Telephone and Telegraph Company, it is reported, reveal that over five million "vote" calls have been received since the program was started.

A Musical Marvel

TWICE AS MANY MEN AS WOMEN apply for auditions, it is said, which is contrary to the idea that women want to make themselves heard. Major Bowes' Units have played over five thousand engagements in over two thousand cities, including some in every state of the Union and two provinces of Canada. This, in itself, is a huge theatrical enterprise.

Major Bowes' method of examining applicants is original. In his office, which resembles an old-fashioned Victorian salon rather than an office, he has a finely adjusted loud-speaker, which may be switched



Two Marines from Virginia and Major Bowes display a Jap battlefront battle-flag captured at Tulagi when the Marines landed. These two were a portion of the contingent who appeared on the program.

from one studio to another. His large staff of experts, required to examine the applicants which number from five hundred to six hundred a week, hear the applicants in the studios. The Major turns on, by switch, this or that studio, as he desires, or as his attention is called to a particularly likely applicant. Of course, it would be impossible for the Major to have five hundred aspirants a week. He can take time only for the best. In hearing them through a loudspeaker, he gets the same effect that the listener will get over the radio.

Every applicant is given a careful hearing. At the auditions, they are permitted to sing their numbers complete. The applicants are never discouraged. If it is felt that they are not suitable, they are told directly, but are never criticized. It should be remembered that the Major is as anxious to discover desirable performers, in which the American public is likely to be interested, as is the applicant anxious for an opportunity to appear.

There can be no question that the Amateur Program has stimulated an interest in music study. It affects all classes of music study and all instruments. Thousands of would-be singers have been inspired by hearing that others of humble origin, have, by reason of hard study, risen until they have an opportunity to appear before the general public.

Although the Major, in his spontaneous "emseeing" strives to give candid verbal camera shots of the contestants, the appeal is, of course, entirely through the imagination, as it may be reached via the ear.

The radio fan is obliged to imagine what the contestant looks like, his gestures, and his facial expression. When well known actors or moving picture stars are heard over the radio, their features are familiar to many of the listeners. In the Major's radio cast are performers who have been seen by only a handful of people. They are unknowns reaching up for fame. Because of the appeal to the ear, the programs must be limited largely to musical performance, imitations or tap dancing. There is a standard Broadway joke about the *dance du ventre* dancer who was indignant when she was rejected by a radio program maker. Although the appeal is entirely aural it is, nevertheless, surprising how much of the personality of the performers can be conveyed by the voice.

A Road to Recognition

THE MAJOR ALWAYS STRESSES the importance of preparation. Not that he undervalues natural talent; but he feels that many of those who fail do so because they are unprepared. He also lays great stress upon character and individuality, realizing that in order to succeed, one must have something distinctive to give the world.

At one time there were sixteen different Major Bowes' Units on the road. Practically all of the talent in these Units was unknown before discovered by Major Bowes; and much of it would have been obliged to wait for years, had it not been uncovered in this way.

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Pre

Tanks—Tank
Wings—Bomber
Wide Variety
mand Reconnaissance
Motor Transports—
Pontoons—Gyro
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Bomber
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es—Com-
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