

**The
Story of Major Bowes
and His
Amateur Hour**



"This Review of the work of Major Bowes appeared in The Etude for December, 1939, 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."



*A Million-Dollar Idea Carried
Out by a Million-
Dollar Personality*

The Story of Major Bowes and His 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 theurgic success of Major Edward Bowes, showman extraordinary, keen business executive, and the best "emsee" of the age. If you are not a pilgrim on 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 to-night," 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, coming from his famous New York Capitol Theater. In these programs he inserted little bits of homely philosophy and an occasional poem, usually highly sentimental and moral. These he delivered with the proper confidential, or lachrymose accent, savoring of his Hibernian ancestry. When an Irishman is sentimental, he *is* sentimental. 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.

Major Bowes was apparently endowed with the Midas touch. Almost everything to which he 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 a master of the art of pleasing people; and his "mike" technic is worthy of study.

Biographical and Hereditary

MAJOR EDWARD BOWES was born in San Francisco, of Irish parents. The Major does not give his age, not even in "Who's Who" in America. He is one of those perpetually young people over fifty, who might be between sixty and seventy—and who cares. Around the beginning of this century he had already established himself as a wealthy business man in San Francisco. His grandfather was a North of Ireland Methodist Clergyman. There is to this day a relic of a Wesleyan pulpit effulgence in the Major's voice. He always seems to be talking to his congregation.

In his youth, young Bowes was moderately trained in music.

However, he has not had the audacity of his former satellite, "Roxy," who, with no musical knowledge whatever, did not hesitate to conduct imposing symphonic works played by large orchestras. The Major's first business enterprise, as a very young man, was that of writing business and 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 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 daredevil. 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 the Chinese tongs, with their record of uncanny oriental murders, 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 was shot down in open court. Ultimately all of 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 début 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 interested capital and 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, he reestablished his fortune.

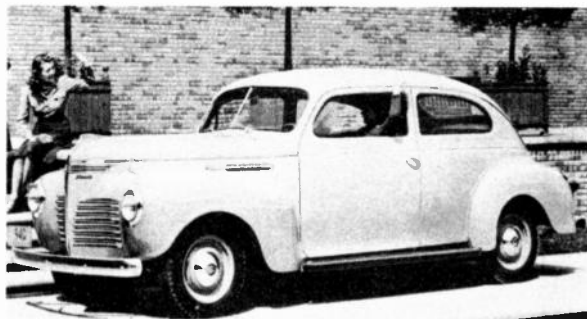
In 1903, Major Bowes married the famous actress, Margaret Illington; they moved to New York where Major Bowes acquired an interest in the Cort Theater (also the Park Square Theater in Boston); and he commenced producing plays. In 1918, he built the Capitol Theater on Broadway in New York, which at that 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 a new form of musical, vaudeville, and moving picture entertainment, which has been widely imitated. In 1925 he started to broadcast a weekly "Family" Program on Sunday, with a very humanistic personal musical appeal. The music was always of a very high order and remains so today. This type of program led to the development of moving picture symphony orchestras in all parts of the country. H. L. Rothafel ("Roxy") also had a big part in this movement. 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 weekly "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 Hour, "Again we have the Wheel of Fortune. Around and 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 became professionals, making tours of the theaters and acting the rôles of amateurs. This fraud was easily penetrated, and the public soon turned its back on amateur hours.

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

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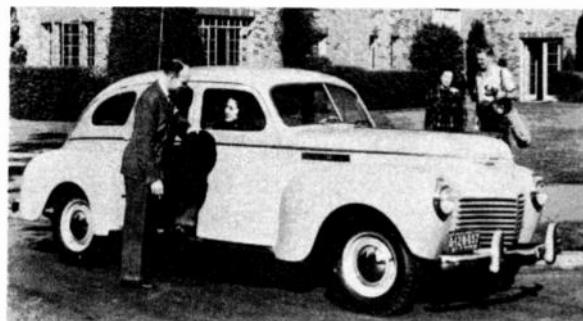


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enormously to the amusement of the hearers. Most of all, the writer feels, however, the first appeal of the hour is in "Fate": "Who will Fate favor tonight?" The Major, in all probability, got his famous line from the Chinese sage, Confucius, who said, "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 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."

The Major's script or program routine must be very carefully prepared. The time limits of the radio make this imperative. Of course much of the banter and fun that the listener hears is really spontaneous. It all, however, must have the semblance of being spontaneous. Just who thinks up the spurts of precocity which come bubbling from the mouths of children on the program, we do not know; but evidently it is all as ingeniously prepared, as is the copy advertising the wares of the sponsors. The Major and his Amateurs must sell automobiles, or the public would be deprived of one of its leading weekly entertainments. The Chrysler interests are not concerned in giving away free entertainment. They must move motor cars as rapidly as possible from the line in the garage.

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 Hour is now nearly five years old. It started March 24, 1935. It is estimated that consideration has been given to over



ELMER TRUDGEN,

a Canadian farm boy, pictured with the "One Man Band" he assembled and played on one of the Major Bowes' Amateur Hours over the air. His band includes Piano, Violon, Guitar, Drums, Triangles, Wood Blocks, Cymbal, Bells and Chimes.



CLYDE BARRIE,

called one of the greatest Negro singing discoveries since Roland Hayes. Clyde Barrie, baritone, is a Major Bowes discovery. Barrie worked as elevator boy, red cap, clerk, and so on.

hour gives them an escape from oblivion provided by fate, dangling before them possibly immense financial returns.

Second, it affords to hundreds 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 are catholic, in that they 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

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

A Theatrical Flair

THE AMATEUR HOUR 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 Company. The seats are free, but passes must be secured in advance. The house is always "packed." The audience, and its applause, then become parts of the air show. The wary 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 know what he is engaging. The plan is what the French term "*étonnant* (astonishing, marvelous);" there never has been anything like it. The audiences in the theaters know that they at least will see performances that thousand have already approved. Smart Major, smart audiences, smart idea!

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 Rapée his opportunity as a conductor. Later on Eugene Ormandy came to the orchestra as a violin player on the last row of the violin section. 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 evidently 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. Of course he cannot prevent any applicant from coming from anywhere.

Where Enthusiasm Exudes

THE POPULARITY OF THE AMATEUR HOUR 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 anyone save Colonel Lindbergh. The records in the American Telephone and Telegraph Company it is reported reveal that over three million "vote" calls have been received since the hour was started. Over fifty expert telephone operators and tabulators are required in the Columbia Broadcasting System Building, on Broadway, to record calls on Amateur Nights.

Each of the fifty New York operators handles lines for two incoming calls. Pencils fly across special forms for recording the votes, limited to one to an individual, three to a family, and twenty-five to institutions and other group balloters. Two page boys collect them and shoot them to four accountants in a tabulating room. In that room also a direct wire brings in the vote tabulations from honor cities. Thirty seconds before each of the announcements of the results, given at 9:30 and 9:51, the totals are closed and rushed to Major Bowes' desk on the stage. More than mechanical alertness is required of the girls who receive the myriad calls for a score of acts. They must be ready, as well, to answer managers' bids for acts, or to reassure some worried caller who is certain one of the entertainers is a long lost relative.

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' Theater Groups have played over four 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 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



DORIS WESTON,
*moving picture star, is Major Bowes
discovery.*



CHARLES M. SCHWAB,
*the late Steel King, as an alert
photographer caught him at
Major Bowes' Amateur Hour
broadcast.*

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 hear five hundred aspirants a week. He can take time only for the best. In hearing them through a loud-speaker, he gets the same effect that the listener will get over the radio.

Every applicant is given a careful hearing, if there is any indication of the slightest talent. At the auditions, they are permitted to sing their numbers complete. There is no gong at the auditions. The applicants are never discouraged. If it is felt that they are not available, they are told directly, but are never criticized. It should be remembered that the Major is far more anxious to discover desirable performers, in which the American public is likely to be interested, than is the applicant anxious for an opportunity to appear.

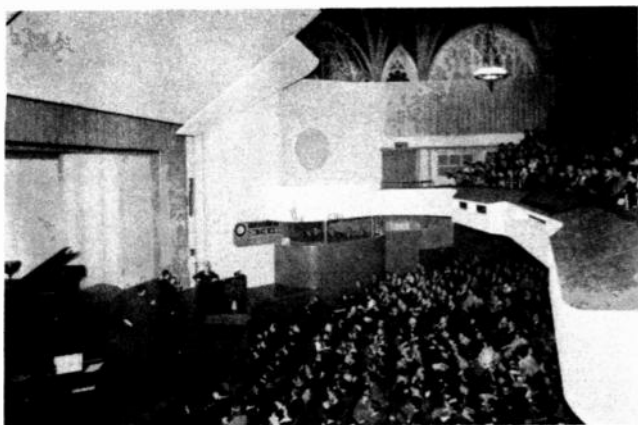
There can be no question that the Amateur Hour has stimulated an interest in music study. It affects all classes of music study and all instruments. Thousands of would be singers have been inspired by hearing that others of humble origin, have, by reason of hard study, risen until they have an opportunity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

Although the Major, in his spontaneous "emseing" 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 *danse 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.

Seeking the Primrose Path

NATURALLY, SUCH AN ALLURING DREAM of fame and wealth brings to the Major's elevator many aspiring "artists" with what may be indulgently called unstable mentalities. We waited around for hours watching some of these unfortunate people. Conversations in the elevators ascending to the Major's office can be both laughable and tragic. His assistants must have long since developed a technic to defend him from the barrage of cerebral misfits hungry for footlight fame. As the writer was ascending to the studio office, one individual evidently mistook him for the Major himself. He stood stiffly at salute, as formal as the guard at the gate of Buckingham Palace, gradually focused his eyes on the point of his radiant nose, and then chucked us under the chin. Just what his specialty was the writer never found out.



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 only "half-baked." 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 Amateur Hour 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. These companies, in themselves, are a major amusement enterprise of large dimensions.

Major Bowes is in no sense a professional musician; although he studied music when a child and recalls with no little thrill when he played at the Lincoln Grammar School in San Francisco. David Belasco and David Warfield attended the same school.

What becomes of the performers who make good on the radio hour? Do they drop right back into oblivion? Not if they have the "stuff." From very small beginnings, great artists have arisen. Long before the Amateur Hour, Rosa Ponselle and John Charles Thomas were both in vaudeville. That was years before the Metropolitan hailed them as great artists. Lucielle Browning, who sang at the Metropolitan Opera, was literally discovered by the Amateur Hour. Doris Weston, who played opposite Dick Powell in the pictures, was another. The famous Negro baritone, Clyde Barrie, was another Amateur Hour product.

The Major is an optimist in the highest sense. He wants to see a more joyous world, with more joyous people in it. One of his favorite quotations, which he has reprinted in his "Verses I Like," comes from the memoirs of the Reverend Sydney Smith (1855). It runs, "When you rise in the morning, form a resolution to make the day a happy one to a fellow creature. It is easily done; a left off garment to the man who needs it, a kind word to the sorrowful, an encouraging expression to the striving; trifles, in themselves as light as air, will do it, at least for the twenty-four hours; and, if you are young, depend upon it, it will tell when you are old; and, if you are old, rest assured it will send you gently and happily down the stream of human time to eternity. By the most simple arithmetical sum, look at the result; you send one person, only one, happily through the day; that is three hundred and sixty-five in the course of the year; and supposing you live only forty years after you commence that course of medicine, you have made 14,600 human beings happy, at all events for a time. Now, worthy reader, is this not simple? It is too short for a sermon, too homely for ethics, and too easily accomplished for you to say, 'I would if I could'."

