

‘SAY GOODNIGHT, GRACIE’

By Charles Apple | THE SPOKESMAN-REVIEW

At the end of each of their radio and television shows, George Burns would pull the cigar out of his mouth, glance over at his adorable but somewhat dimwitted wife and co-star, Gracie Allen, and urge her: “Say goodnight, Gracie.” She would dutifully reply: “Goodnight, Gracie!”

The Burns and Allen comedy duo would spend the better part of two decades on Vaudeville, making comedy one-reel shorts and a hit radio show. Their TV series debuted on CBS on Oct. 12, 1950 — 75 years ago.

THE EVOLUTION OF BURNS AND ALLEN

She was Grace “Gracie” Allen, born in San Francisco and given her first radio role by famed comedian Eddie Cantor when she was 3 years old. She later developed a talent for singing and dancing.

He was Nathan Birnbaum, born in New York City and discovered singing harmony with his friends as he made syrup in a candy shop. He failed a physical to join the army for World War I because of his poor eyesight, changed his name to George Burns, sang in Vaudeville acts and began dabbling in comedy.

The two met in 1922 with Gracie onstage setting George up with punchlines.

Very early on, however, George noticed that Gracie, with her high-pitched “flapper”-style delivery, was getting bigger laughs that he was. He wisely rewrote his material so that he was attempting to monologue and Gracie kept breaking in with quips and unintentional wisecracks.



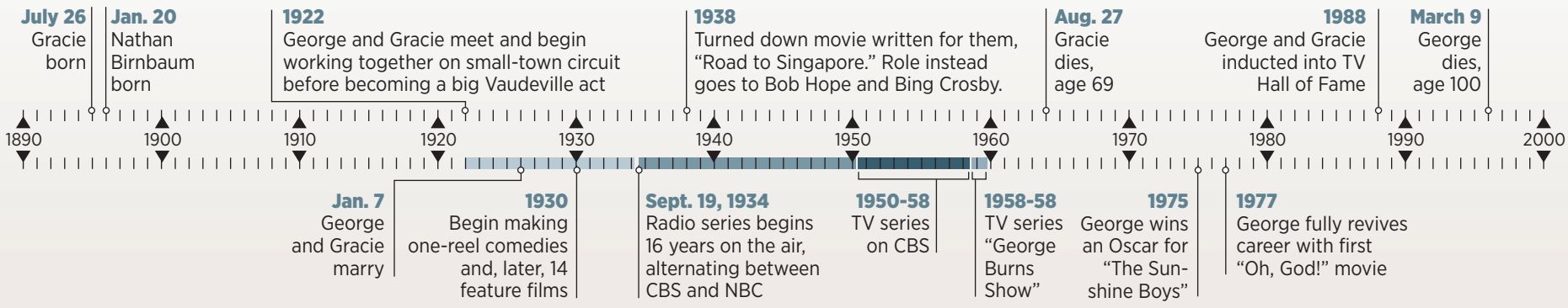
Allen and Burns in 1924

Audiences ate it up. George and Gracie moved from the small town circuit to major venues and were married in 1926. They began appearing in films in 1930 and launched their own radio show in 1934 that would run for 16 years.

The two also became known for their outrageous publicity stunts. In 1932, Gracie would walk onstage during another comedian’s performance and ask if anyone had seen her brother.

Gracie ran for president in 1940, with the slogan, “Down With Common Sense — Vote For Gracie.” “Everybody knows a woman is better than a man when it comes to introducing bills into the house,” Allen said at one point.

In 1950, Burns and Allen migrated their immensely popular radio show to CBS television, where it would run for eight seasons.



THE GEORGE BURNS AND GRACIE ALLEN TV SERIES

The Burns and Allen radio series was originally a variety show, much like their stage act had been. By 1941, George realized he and Gracie had grown too old for that type of flirtatious humor and turned the show into more of a household sitcom with George dealing with Gracie’s “Illogical logic.” The TV series continued that storyline and even retained many of their co-stars.





George wanted to produce the show on film, rather than broadcast it live, which was the norm at the time. CBS wouldn’t foot the bill for this so George formed his own company, McCadden Productions, and paid for it out of his own pocket. He began to produce other TV shows as well — most notably, “Mr. Ed.”

“All I had to do was say, ‘Gracie, how’s your brother?’ and she talked for 38 years,” Burns would write in a memoir. “The character was simply the dizziest dame in the world, but what made her different from all the other ‘Dumb Doras’ was that Gracie played her as if she were totally sane; as if her answers actually made sense.”





Co-star Bea Benaderet followed Burns and Allen from their radio show to their TV series. For some reason, her last name was always misspelled in the show’s credits. Benaderet would go on to voice Betty Rubble in “The Flintstones,” and play Cousin Pearl in “The Beverly Hillbillies” and the innkeeper and mother on “Petticoat Junction.”

One big gimmick introduced in their TV series and inspired by Thornton Wilder’s 1938 play “Our Town,” was that George would break the dramatic fourth wall and make asides directly to the audience. In the show’s final two seasons, George even had a “magic television” that allowed him to watch Gracie interacting with her friends back at the house.





By the 1940s, Allen had had enough of show business. Burns had to convince her to continue working for the radio series and then for TV. Allen had a series of mild heart attacks over the run of the TV show and finally put her foot down after Season 8. Burns continued on with a solo spin-off show for one season but to little success. Allen died in 1964.

Sources: “Retro TV: Classic Shows We Used to Love” by Ian Collis, Internet Movie Database, Television Academy Foundation, Radio Hall of Fame, Old Time Radio Catalogue, the University of Arizona’s American Vaudeville

ALL PHOTOS FROM MCCADDEN PRODUCTIONS AND CBS TELEVISION