

# ***The Age-Old Conflict***

George Ansbro

All the way through a protracted career in broadcasting announcer George Ansbro was a stickler for precision. The same could be said of many of his contemporaries, of course, men responsible for uttering the opening lines of thousands of shows on the airwaves at a defined moment back in the day. Nevertheless, Ansbro possessed an insatiable appetite for timing, for accuracy, for getting things done right. During an emblematic instance, in a published missive, he chided an editorial that appeared in *The New York Times*. He felt it his obligation to gently admonish that illustrious bastion of journalistic veracity for its lapse of factual precision.

I fear you were off the mark by six years regarding NBC's founding in New York.

The Blue and Red Networks with their New York outlets, WJZ and WEAJ, came together as NBC at 711 Fifth Avenue in 1927. A year later I first set foot in that wondrous place.... But the year you mention, 1933, does hold a large place in broadcasting history because that's when NBC, me included, moved into Rockefeller Center.<sup>1</sup>

Ansbro's tenacity for exactness was also exhibited in matters pertaining to his own life. It was clearly visible when a conspicuous situation surfaced late in his career pertaining to his professional livelihood.

On that occasion he discovered that eons earlier someone in NBC's personnel office had inadvertently gotten it wrong when jotting down his start date with the network. His permanent file card, to his dismay, noted that his employment began March 8, 1934, a date Ansbro winced over, claiming it had "no significance at all to me." In his mind his service with NBC began on or about October 1, 1931, almost two-and-a-half years earlier. Yet, following his request, after a fleeting try at checking it out, NBC reported it found nothing to dispute the 1934 start date. Should it come as any surprise, then—knowing how announcers are sometimes fussy about meticulous matters—that a steadfast Ansbro was soon focused on setting the record straight?

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<sup>1</sup> Adapted from a letter to the editor by George Ansbro appearing in *The New York Times* on April 24, 1987; it referenced a *Times* editorial of April 8, 1987.

He made up his mind to do everything in his power to right an alleged wrong. He intended to correct the oversight in order to be fully credited—like a prisoner behind bars—for every day of time served! Ansbro was absolutely certain he *knew* when he first entered the employ of NBC and its dual networks (the Red and the Blue) at its headquarters building at 711 Fifth Avenue in New York. Now if only he could *prove* it, there were at least a couple of potentially satisfying rewards that could stem from the outcome. First, a longstanding error in the network's official record-keeping that he knew to be amiss would be fixed. Second, it may have dawned on him that, theoretically at least, he could possibly shatter a network durability record sometime down the road if this was finally straightened out.

Ansbro was among a handful of the chain's stalwarts, including a cadre of rather elite announcers who were blessed with golden throats and silver tongues. Some of that force served with distinction together for incredibly lengthy time spans. Nevertheless it may have occurred to him that if the Lord tarried, he just might outlast them all, prevailing beyond the impressive tenures of several peers. If that was to occur he would set a longevity record of unparalleled proportions in American network announcing. But to reach anything the ethereal history books and Guinness's records would cite he'd need to get his own house in order by having his start date amended. It had become an issue of some absorbing gravity, one he simply wouldn't turn loose until its proper conclusion. He wasn't bent out of shape over it but approached it with resolve, determined he could—and would—see that error rectified.

Ansbro began working for NBC as a page boy in the fall of 1931. He had received a telephone call in September of that year from Ruth Keeler, head of NBC personnel, offering him a page spot between the hours of 5 p.m. and midnight daily. It was a direct consequence of an application he submitted to her for a post in May 1931. Even though NBC's policy required hires to be at least 18, Ansbro falsified his application—he was 16, just completing high school—and was still turned down.

He worked a “horrible” job that season as a bus boy at a Coney Island cafeteria, then billed as “the largest in the world.” Almost dutifully, it seemed, as the youngest of seven Ansbro offspring, all enrolling in higher education, so did George. That fall when classes took up at Manhattan College he was part of the student body. His siblings graduated from institutions of higher learning. They all did, in fact, except George. Why should he be any different? The fact of the matter was plainly that—*he was*.

At an early age young George was caught up in the euphoria of proliferating entertainment sweeping the country. And it never left his “system.” He was born to Irish Catholic parents who immigrated to America from County Mayo, Ireland, yet his folks didn't meet until they attended an Irish dance hall in Brooklyn. As the last of the litter, George entered the world in Brooklyn, New York, on January 14, 1915. A trait borne out in him was that the Ansbro youngsters were raised to honor the values of religion, education and work.

One depiction paints the youngest family member as the “black sheep” of the clan for devoting so much time to “whatever form of show business was

available to him.”<sup>2</sup> That cost money, of course, and in 1927, at 12 years of age, George acquired his first income-producing employment—delivering a local newspaper to a route of Brooklyn subscribers. That was superseded by a job carrying flowers for a local florist. Despite those avenues—he was basically a nervous and timid child—he still reveled in the limelight when opportunities to perform came his way. As a boy soprano, George was gifted, demonstrating a quality singing voice, and was also able to memorize lyrics quickly. At family gatherings he mustered up his courage and grabbed every chance he could get to sing for a crowd.

In 1928, at 13, he auditioned and won a spot on Milton Cross’s NBC Radio *Children’s Hour* feature. Until his voice changed three years hence, the juvenile routinely performed in that company. It was during that era he came to embrace radio wholeheartedly, realizing it was the venue in which he wanted to invest his life. Radio was, after all, the coming thing—and it was at the same time already here! The first method of communicating simultaneously with millions of people across the nation was an invigorating prospect, and a giddy George Ansbro saw himself on the cusp of that panorama.

He had enrolled in the meantime at Xavier High School in Manhattan (1927). But after three years, when his school uniform no longer fit—to avoid the cost of a new one during the first full year of the Great Depression—the rising high school senior transferred to nearby De La Salle Institute in Manhattan which had no compulsory uniform. He graduated there at 16 in 1931.

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<sup>2</sup> Ansbro, Jo-Anne. *The Life of George Ansbro*. An unpublished, undated biography on the subject shared with this author May 2, 2010. Used by permission.

It took a lot of persuading to convince his parents he could handle both college and the job [as an NBC page], but he did. Even though he studied during the four hours (two each way) spent on the subway, his grades suffered very badly. At the end of the semester it was serious discussion time—college or the job—one of them had to be eliminated. It was college, with the promise to his parents that he would return at a later date.

Three years later he won an audition to become a staff announcer. His dream came true; consequently he never did go back to college, nor did he regret his decision. He remained a staff announcer, which eventually included television until he retired 59 years later.<sup>3</sup>

But in the interim he had to convince NBC that he'd been there that long!

The situation was exacerbated in 1978 when the personnel department of Capital Cities/ABC (his employer then) presented him with a copy of his original job application, notifying him that his retirement was imminent as his 65<sup>th</sup> birthday approached.<sup>4</sup> He had to present his birth certificate to resolve the issue.<sup>5</sup>

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<sup>3</sup> Ibid.

<sup>4</sup> The mandatory retirement age has since been rescinded.

<sup>5</sup> Foti, Catherine M. "A Golden Throat and Silver Tongue Have Given ABC Announcer George Ansbro a Treasure of Broadcasting Memories." *Capital Cities/ABC Ink*, January 1987, p. 4.

Even after that crisis abated, some company records weren't automatically updated and his start date continued to dangle in limbo.

In 1979, Ansbro appealed to his pal, Ray Diaz, whom he signified on one occasion as his "oldest friend."<sup>6</sup> Diaz had been among those youngsters in NBC's employ at the time Ansbro was hired and eventually advanced to executive levels with the network. He not only became a supervisor to Ansbro but also a mentor, one the fledgling and later senior announcer continually admired. In his quest to establish the proper data in his file, Ansbro asked Diaz to go to bat for him, corroborating the details of his hire. By then, Capital Cities/ABC was Ansbro's employer, one he termed "an offshoot of an offshoot (ABC) of an offshoot (Blue Network) of NBC."<sup>7</sup> He explained to Diaz that if he (Ansbro) was alive in 1981, he would like to celebrate 50 years in the business and have NBC's documentation affirm it. If NBC would accept his chum's intervention, Ansbro was convinced, the matter could be settled once and for all. Presumably NBC would then inform ABC of his actual starting date.

Did it happen? When asked about it, his wife acknowledged: "George, through the MANY proof positive responses from his letter to Ray (with copies to others and word of mouth), proved without a doubt he did indeed start 10/01/31 and NBC made it official in their records. He never really was too upset about it," she added, "more amused than anything, because he knew he was right and would eventually prove it."<sup>8</sup>

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<sup>6</sup> Ansbro, George. *I Have a Lady in the Balcony: Memoirs of a Broadcaster*. Jefferson, N.C.: McFarland, 2000, p. 215.

<sup>7</sup> He was correct in his delineation as the progression of time included changes in ownership and designations of broadcasters.

<sup>8</sup> Email to the author from Jo-Anne Ansbro, May 31, 2010. Used by permission.

Ansbro liked to tell a story on himself that occurred during his early days at NBC. He recalled it many years later in a letter to his friend Ray Diaz.

I don't know if you ever heard what they did to me the first week I worked at 711. One night some wag talked old Mike Farley into ordering me to go up on the roof and pick up a bucket of steam. And then bring it down to master control. Like a jerk I fell for it and did what my boss told me. After 20 minutes of searching around in the dark up there I started down and was scared to death old Farley would fire me because I was empty-handed. The screams of laughter could be heard all over the 13<sup>th</sup> floor when I got back. Farley must have cracked a rib and Alvin Simmons in the coat-room was nearly rolling on the floor. That was my baptism at NBC.<sup>9</sup>

There were almost daily incidents during that early era that would prompt a very young man to experience eye-popping episodes he could consider virtually surreal. Particularly was this so as he stumbled upon legendary idols in person that he had only heard about until then. Maintaining composure as best he could while observing and, on occasion, being introduced to celebrities, sometimes it required all the stamina he could gather to appear at ease. "I remember one

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<sup>9</sup> From a personal letter to Ray Diaz on January 13, 1979. Used by permission.

night [movie star sex symbol] Jean Harlow, at the height of her fame, came in with [Walter] Winchell and stayed in the control room (where I could get a good view of her) and I damn near dropped dead,” he recalled nearly a half-century later.<sup>10</sup> And when she sent him out to buy cigarettes for her, you could have knocked him over with a feather!

As time passed he got used to encountering star-studded icons in the hallways of NBC and eventually knew many on a first-name basis. But in those nascent years of his service, it was enough to turn a young boy’s head. Fortunately, Ansbro was able to give the impression it didn’t matter much whether a person was well-known or obscure. To his credit, he liked nearly all people and outwardly, at least, seemed secure with the haves and the have-nots. Many of them, as well as his peers, considered him “one of the nicest guys in the business,” a plus that invariably stood him in good stead when luminaries came calling at Radio City.

The whole time he was serving as a page and eventually as a guide (a step up the ladder), he was dreaming of the day he’d finally get a chance to become an announcer for the network and enunciate in deep, resonant, reverent-sounding tones: “This is the Red (or Blue) Network of the National Broadcasting Company.” To gain experience—well, that may have been a byproduct for, to him, getting on the air was of paramount importance in his order of priorities—in mid 1932, he began filling in on his off days for regular announcers at Jersey City, New Jersey’s WAAT. Keep in mind that he was only 17. Yet here he was on the air at a time when most other teenage boys with ethereal aspirations could only

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<sup>10</sup> Ibid.

*think* about such possibilities for the future! Fate had smiled profusely on Ansbro once again and he was living the proverbial adage of “being in the right place at the right time.”

A couple of years afterward NBC decided to promote someone from its uniformed ranks (its page/guide force) to the celebrated category of announcing staff, something that never had been done before.<sup>11</sup> On the day of the auditions, May 17, 1934, some 14 young men competed for the coveted solo prize. Ansbro was convinced the most formidable of them all was Hugh James (McIlreavy), who possessed a “fabulously distinctive voice.” James’ career would ultimately see him introducing a quartet of quarter-hour chain-fed serial dramas, all on the same day—CBS’s *Wendy Warren and the News* and *The Second Mrs. Burton* followed by NBC’s *The Right to Happiness* and *When a Girl Marries*—while simultaneously presiding over the *Voice of Firestone* weekly on NBC (and later, ABC) Radio and Television.

Despite those stunning feats, on this day James wouldn’t win the initial rivalry for the junior announcer’s post at NBC. That trophy went to George Ansbro who was convinced his unpaid on-air stints at WAAT won him the job. Later that same week the New York dailies and trade papers reported that CBS’s Bert Parks, age 22, was no longer the youngest network announcer in town; NBC’s Ansbro, at 21 (he was really 19, remember?) had edged Parks out of that hallowed spot. By two years later (1936), he was upped to senior announcer status.

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<sup>11</sup> Ansbro had been promoted from the \$15-a-week post as page to a guide in 1933, a \$20-a-week job, taking visitors through the network’s new Rockefeller Center Radio City headquarters. The junior announcer was paid \$25 weekly while senior announcers earned \$45 at their start. (Source: *Asbury Park Press*, Neptune, N.J., April 15, 2000, p. G3.)

Over an expanded professional career Ansbro was a man who needed no introduction but offered zillions. He gave them while pitching scads of sponsors' commodities on a throng of transcontinental series. Early in the 21<sup>st</sup> century, to the best of his recollection, his network radio service as an announcer comprised all of the shows identified here (except as indicated).<sup>12</sup> They are named alphabetically with the years Ansbro participated in each one.

*The American Album of Familiar Music* (commercials, 1930s-1951)

*The Avengers* (1945-1946)

Big band remotes—Charlie Barnet, Xavier Cugat, Jimmy Dorsey, Tommy Dorsey, Eddie Duchin, Benny Goodman, Gene Krupa, Guy Lombardo, Glenn Miller, Chick Webb, et al. (ca. mid 1930s-mid 1940s)

*Chaplain Jim, U.S.A.* (1942-1945)

*Cliff Edwards Show* (1944-1948)

*Coast to Coast on a Bus* (boy soprano, 1927-1930)

*Easy Aces* (1936)

*Esso News* (1938-1941)

*Ethel and Albert* (1944-ca. 1945)

*FBI Washington* (1965-1989)

*Home Sweet Home* (1934-1936)

*Just Plain Bill* (substitute announcer and commercials, 1936)

*Let's Dance* (1934-1935)

*Lowell Thomas and the News* (1943-1944)

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<sup>12</sup> Adapted from a personal letter to the author June 26, 2005. Used by permission.

*Manhattan Maharajah* (1951-late 1950s)  
*Manhattan Merry-Go-Round* (commercials, 1930s-1949)  
*Mrs. Wiggs of the Cabbage Patch* (1936-1938)  
*Mr. Keen, Tracer of Lost Persons* (substitute announcer and commercials, 1938-1941)  
*Omar Herth, the Swingmaker* (1938-mid 1940s)  
*Pick a Date with Buddy Rogers* (1949-1950)  
*Sammy Kaye's Sunday Serenade* (1943-1944)  
*Stella Dallas* (commercials, 1938-1940)  
*Waltz Time* (commercials, 1930s-1948)  
*What Makes You Tick?* (1948-1951)  
*When a Girl Marries* (ca. 1953-ca. 1954)  
*Young Widder Brown* (1938-1956)

On television during the mid 1940s, Ansbro delivered some early evening experimental newscasts. While these were dispatched live they were also extremely primitive by modern standards. Without film to accompany anything and while merely facing a camera, Ansbro read news copy ripped from a teletype machine. In that epoch there were no commercials either, "Because there was practically no audience," he reasoned. The lights were so intensely hot, he remembered, "When I finished the newscast, my clothes could have been wrung out."

Before the 1940s passed, however, Ansbro was paired with John Charles Daley (of CBS-TV's *What's My Line?* fame) for a daily 7 p.m. ABC-TV quarter-

hour newscast. Daley had previously been a CBS Radio newsman. Ansbro introduced the program and delivered live plugs for Pontiac automobiles.

During the 1953-1954 season he was one of a quartet of roving interlocutors on ABC-TV's *Dr. I.Q., the Mental Banker*. The audience participation show's master of ceremonies, Jimmy McClain, called on Ansbro and his cohorts to supply contestants seated in the gallery who—for a specified number of silver dollars—attempted to answer questions posed by the emcee. This allowed Ansbro opportunities to deliver the incomparable stimulating metaphor that appeared to arouse nearly every American of age at the time: *I have a lady in the balcony*. It became such a widespread hit Ansbro adopted it when he titled his memoir nearly a half-century later.

For many years after his aural broadcasting heyday ended he delivered weather inserts and local news intros for New York's network flagship station WABC-TV during *World News This Morning* and *Good Morning America*. And until his retirement in 1990, following a debut on ABC-TV on July 15, 1968, he prerecorded a mid-break announcement that ran on *One Life to Live*. Those declarations were taped weekly “in a session which lasted hardly a half hour,” he surmised a long time afterward. In doing them he maintained a tie with daytime serials that he'd launched more than a half-century earlier.

Ansbro's voice was actually linked with soap operas with histories that extended back to July 23, 1934. On that date he and the Blue web's *Home Sweet Home* premiered in sync. The durable spokesman initially pushed Procter & Gamble Company's Chipso Granules detergent in a test-marketing sample there. With the possible exception of many nightly big band remotes, he may have

devoted more airtime collectively to drainboard dramas than to any other single genre—embracing a half-dozen of the more somber radio sagas with a couple of daily humorous narratives, too, plus the single televised tale. It was a giddy triumph. Even then, however, it yet may be surpassed by still another record in that species, one also set by Ansbro.

On September 26, 1938, he kicked off the arrival of *Young Widder Brown* at NBC.<sup>13</sup> He didn't know it then, of course, and neither did anyone else; over the next 18 years he was to remain in his post, the only cast member still there when it ended. With very rare exceptions for illnesses and brief planned absences he reported in until that enduring dishpan drama was withdrawn by NBC on June 29, 1956. It's remarkable that he was given exclusive dispensation to persist on an NBC series a dozen years after the Blue Network was shunted off and turned into NBC competitor ABC.

Yet, just possibly, George Ansbro's most stunning exploit was still ahead of him. Aside from the fact he served network broadcasting more than 58 years,<sup>14</sup> it may have been just this: *He is the only radio daytime serial narrator to remain in that capacity with one feature for that prolonged length while also doing so on a single network.* No one else in the history of aural broadcasting reached

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<sup>13</sup> From June 6 to September 23, 1938, the Hummerts tried out the daytime serial *Young Widder Jones* with the same characters over the MBS network at 4 p.m. Eastern Time. The producers used "auditions" on a key station or a smaller or regional chain to build an audience and attract a sponsor before switching a show to a more prestigious web after an underwriter was in place. That's what happened here as it moved to NBC. Only this time their newest narrative was to bump up against *Lorenzo Jones*, an established property that had been at NBC 17 months, and was set to air at 11:15 a.m. *Young Widder Jones* was to follow at 11:30 a.m., the two separated only by a station break. To avoid confusion over nomenclature, the Hummerts altered their newest drama's title to *Young Widder Brown* and everything proceeded. From the first day at NBC, George Ansbro introduced it.

<sup>14</sup> Cathy A. Goetz, correspondent for Neptune, New Jersey's *Asbury Park Press*, establishes in the April 15, 2000, issue (p. G1) that Ansbro's career spanned 58 years, three months, 12 days, "the longest of any network employee."

that plateau or even arrived within striking distance. It's yet one more attainment by a man whose longevity record may be celebrated in manifold spheres.

For years Ansbro proffered this epigram every weekday afternoon, so familiar to millions of housewives in mid 20<sup>th</sup> century America:

*Again we present the moving human drama of a woman's heart and a mother's love—Young Widder Brown. In the little town of Simpsonville, attractive Ellen Brown, with two children to support, faces the question of what she owes to them and what she owes to herself. Here's the story of life and love as we all know it.*

There were variations of that opening at other times but that's the most recognizable one in the mid to late 1940s. In the 1950s, the maxim was condensed to this:

*The National Broadcasting Company now brings you Young Widder Brown ... the story of attractive Ellen Brown with two fatherless children to support ... the story of the age-old conflict between a mother's duty and a woman's heart.*

Note the reference to “the age-old conflict,” ironically something that was to plague George Ansbro himself in later years!

In the meantime he once cited that daily washboard weeper as “eighteen years of the most excruciating radio torture ever devised by Frank and Anne Hummert.”<sup>15</sup> Operating under the corporate moniker of Air Features, Inc., the indomitable Hummerts produced *Young Widder Brown* and more than three score additional tear-jerking stories of what passed as “normal” heroines in jeopardy. Virtually all of their soapy sagas witnessed beleaguered damsels in distress, utterly mired in misery on most days, seeing only brief lapses of episodic bliss between harrowing experiences. That was truly “normalcy” in their dramas.

As a daily observer of such tripe Ansbro—having been associated with the Hummerts on a quintet of melodramatic serials (*Chaplain Jim*, *U.S.A.*, *Just Plain Bill*, *Mrs. Wiggs of the Cabbage Patch*, *Stella Dallas*, and *Young Widder Brown*)—would have been positioned to speak with authority in making the assessment he did of his most durable radio assignment. Some would say that sweeping estimate was applicable to dozens of Ellen Brown’s contemporaries.

Frank and Anne Hummert were responsible for dozens of quarter-hours and half-hours of network radio time from the early 1930s to the late 1950s. Not only did their assembly-line factory fabricate more soap operas than anybody else, it profoundly churned out music features, crime dramas and juvenile adventure serials as well. The Hummerts’ nomenclature was attached to no fewer than 125 network series and maybe even more.

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<sup>15</sup> Cox, Jim. *Radio Speakers: Narrators, News Junkies, Sports Jockeys, Tattletales, Tipsters, Toastmasters and Coffee Klatch Couples Who Verbalized the Jargon of the Aural Ether from the 1920s to the 1980s—A Biographical Dictionary*. Jefferson, N.C.: McFarland, 2007, p. 14.

Ansbro narrated or read commercial plugs on many of their programs, heavily dominated by just two rival sponsors that manufactured a surfeit of packaged consumer goods: American Home Products (AHP) and Sterling Drugs—paradoxically, neither considered a “soap” maker. Hence it wasn’t at all uncommon throughout the day to hear Ansbro’s habitual babbling for one or the other. He extolled the qualities of AHP’s Anacin pain reliever, BiSoDol analgesic, Hill’s cold remedy, Kolynos toothpaste and tooth powder, Old English furniture polish, and many more wares; and Sterling’s Bayer aspirin, Haley’s M-O laxative, Double Danderine shampoo, Energine cleaning fluid, Lyons toothpaste and Dr. Lyons tooth powder, Mulsified Coconut Oil shampoo, Phillips milk of magnesia laxative, and so many more. In the Hummert ritual, Ansbro could be the designated interlocutor on one program underwritten by one of those outfits but turn up again within minutes on another Hummert feature reading cowcatcher or hitchhike commercials.<sup>16</sup>

Taking on recurring work for the Hummerts was something like dropping a rainbow trout in a large fish tank in which a shark was already swimming. If the trout didn’t watch its path, it soon would be dead meat, consumed by the water’s larger presence. The acute fears of the actors, musicians, announcers, writers, and others who benefited directly from Air Features, Inc. were somewhat like the trout’s dilemma—and probably more real than imagined. At some point most of those artists heard plenty of stories, observed for themselves or

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<sup>16</sup> Cowcatchers were pithy plugs offered at the top of a program, sometimes delivered “cold” (without any audible sounds preceding them). Hitchhikes were similar brief advertising messages near the very end of time allotted for a program. A Hummert blueprint on many of their shows was to run the principal announcer of one series over to a nearby studio to provide a contrasting voice to that program’s announcer, delivering these early/late pitches, while that show’s regular announcer might travel to another studio to perform the same function.

personally experienced the wrath of Frank or Anne Hummert. Rubbing either the wrong way could be cause for instant dismissal—and possibly the kiss of death if one’s livelihood was heavily tied to their production house for myriad work assignments. Examples of what transpired when the intolerant duo was displeased are cited in a few written accounts.<sup>17</sup> Ansbro, like some colleagues who gained materially by serving in the Hummert fraternity was nevertheless quick to admit his intimidation by them at the least and, frankly, dispiriting apprehension during most of those years. Such was the case in arranging to take earned time away from the job.

When I started announcing *Widder Brown* in 1938, I was delighted to receive not only its fee from the Hummerts, but also fees for doing the twenty-second commercial cowcatchers and hitchhikes before and after *Stella Dallas*.... In 1939, when my NBC staff vacation came around, having heard that the Hummerts frowned on vacations for announcers unless they had been doing their shows for a long time, I decided not to go away but to come in every day during my staff vacation for the Hummert stuff. In 1940, however, not knowing exactly how long was “a long time” ... I got brave and took off ... one week to

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<sup>17</sup> One of the more comprehensive investigations into the Hummert experience is recorded in this author’s *Frank and Anne Hummert’s Radio Factory: The Programs and Personalities of Broadcasting’s Most Prolific Producers* (McFarland, 2003).

go on a Caribbean cruise.... Two substitute announcers filled in for me, one doing *Widder Brown* and another, the *Stella Dallas* cowcatchers and hitchhikes.... On the Monday after my trip, I went into the *Widder Brown* studio and ... everything was hunky-dory. Not so in the *Stella Dallas* studio. Not until I walked in did I find out that my substitute during the previous week was to continue doing the cowcatchers and hitchhikes. It was shabby treatment..., to say nothing of the embarrassment I felt in front of the cast.<sup>18</sup>

Ansbro recounts the panic he felt on still another occasion, in the early 1950s, when the Hummerts embarked on a plan to shore up ratings of a sagging *Young Widder Brown*.

They decided to replace me. I only learned of this through the grapevine, so I approached Dick Leonard, who was directing the show.... He was quite sympathetic ... and [said] ... I had nothing to lose by appearing at the audition, even though the Hummerts had not even notified me of my intended dismissal.

Inasmuch as he was to handle the audition (with Mrs.

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<sup>18</sup> Ansbro, George. *I Have a Lady in the Balcony: Memoirs of a Broadcaster*. Jefferson, N.C.: McFarland, 2000, pp. 149-150.

Hummert making the decision), there was no problem about my being allowed to read.

I remember Mrs. Hummert smiling courteously at me from the control room. What it boiled down to was ... I was auditioning for something I had been doing successfully five days every week for ... fifteen years. On the day of the competition, I faced many of the top announcers ... Frank Gallop, Ed Herlihy, Jack Costello, Nelson Case, and Ken Roberts.... For the next week or so, I kept expecting to hear from the Hummert office that I was through and would be replaced by announcer so-and-so. But such a message never arrived. Whatever made the Hummerts decide to keep me, I never learned. Needless to say, it was a good thing ... I ... found out about the audition.<sup>19</sup>

Ansbro's autobiography is filled with legions of incidents recalling his lengthy service as an NBC, Blue and ABC staff announcer. Many of his tales are humorous; a few are sad. Often they report in objective fashion his encounter with scores of well-known entertainers, politicians, sports figures and others in the public eye. Through his narrative his readers vicariously experience the trappings of network radio behind the microphone while gaining perceptions into

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<sup>19</sup> Ibid., p. 109.

those personalities they might never encounter elsewhere. It's an eye-opening read and worthy of the shelves of serious protégés of old time radio.

One of the most poignant memories among Ansbro's recollections is of the passing of "the first radio announcer to achieve great fame," Graham McNamee, May 9, 1942, at 53. Respected radio historiographer John Dunning classified McNamee as "the most famous man in radio—without question the most influential and hardest-worked announcer in the medium's first decade."<sup>20</sup> Similarly vintage radio historians Frank Buxton and Bill Owen dubbed McNamee "the father of sportscasting."<sup>21</sup> Ansbro's description following the great prodigy's death, meanwhile, allows a glimpse into his own soul. There we discover a deep compassion for a fellow human being, a trait that may have been instilled by his parents as they taught their offspring indispensable family values a few decades earlier.

I was saddened when Graham McNamee passed away.... For a man of his professional stature, he couldn't have been kinder to me when I was starting out as the first junior announcer, so I wanted to pay my respects to him in death. He was reposing at Campbell's Funeral Home, a well-known mortuary on Madison Avenue. When I arrived at about 8 o'clock, I noticed the scarcity of people in the lobby.... I expected the lobby of a funeral establishment to be

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<sup>20</sup> *Radio Speakers*, p. 189.

<sup>21</sup> *Ibid.*

filling up with mourners going to different wakes. Not so here. Inquiring where Mr. McNamee was laid out, I was directed to take the elevator to the proper suite upstairs. Upon entering it I found it hard to believe that I was the only living person there. I was alone in the room with the remains of one of the most famous personages in America. Not even an attendant. Even when the deceased is a nobody, an employee/attendant is customarily close by. I knelt by the casket, studied his countenance, reflected on his remarkable life and prayed for him, all the while expecting to be joined by someone, anyone. For the best part of an hour I stayed, completely alone. An indescribable sadness came over me.... Still unable to understand it, I smiled for the last time at Graham McNamee and said good-bye. That night I tossed and turned an awful lot, wondering what exactly fame was all about.<sup>22</sup>

George Ansbro's personal life away from the studios is recalled in some detail in his autobiography. For years he was a bachelor, sharing a pad with one or more young men with similar professional interests. He was also engaged twice and broke both pledges. At last, in the spring of 1944, he was smitten by a

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<sup>22</sup> Ibid., p. 191.

new hire in the Blue Network's mail room. Jo-Anne Chantal, then 16, was a dozen years his junior. As it turned out she, too, hadn't been truthful about her age when applying for work; incredibly she indicated she was two years older than she was—just as Ansbro had done nearly 13 years earlier! Despite the age difference, as time passed he was convinced that this was the real thing.

The pair courted steadily and when he asked her to marry him in 1946, she said “yes.” Their nuptials at St. Patrick's Cathedral in New York were on June 29, 1946. To that union five children were born, all in New York's Lenox Hill Hospital: Andrew Paul (Drew), November 29, 1950; Marianne (Mimi), March 8, 1952; John, September 15, 1959; and twins Karen and Katie, May 25, 1961.

In the spring of 2001, George, then 86, and Jo-Anne, 74, left metropolitan life and moved into a retirement community in Connecticut. Shortly after, he recorded a summary of their activities during the early period in their new home.

Jo-Anne and I are trying to keep memories of OTR [old time radio] alive by doing re-creations of shows here at Duncaster. We did “The Shadow” and plan soon to do “Fibber McGee and Molly,” “Jack Armstrong” and “Ethel and Albert.”

I also do a one-hour Christmas reading program on an appropriate evening.

Jo-Anne picks the material and it runs the gamut from the Dr. Seuss Christmas story to some real tearjerkers.

I am flattered they like the programs so  
much.<sup>23</sup>

At about this same time Ansbro began having serious difficulty with geographical directions, often being unable to find his way in simple and familiar surroundings. In time, confusion ran unbridled. A physician who tested the retired announcer verified that he had dementia. Even though a six-foot-tall Ansbro was physically robust, his ability to mentally cope had deteriorated and the prognosis was that it wasn't going to improve. The emotional stress on Jo-Anne began to affect her health, a sobering experience. Occasionally George made temporary visits to the adjacent nursing facility to help him deal with his misfortune while weighing heavily on Jo-Anne. When the treatment staff hinted that she might consider allowing him to become a permanent resident, she was incredulous.

Time passed and Ansbro grew worse. At some point Jo-Anne Ansbro at last let herself consider the possibility of relocation. On September 11, 2007, she was informed that a room was available right then but a decision must be made almost immediately. She emailed their children asking for input. A son-in-law eloquently expressed the conclusion of the family in a written response.

Nana, here is what I think.... I think you are an  
incredible person for all of the caring you have done  
for the people in your life (your kids, your parents and

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<sup>23</sup> Personal letter from George Ansbro to the author on April 5, 2003. Used by permission.

your husband) so no matter what you decide you should be free of guilt (you have given more than anyone could ask). This is a terribly difficult time for you but the fact is it is inevitable that the time will come that George will have to move.... I don't know how much will be gained by waiting. If you do it now you will at least get him in the place you want him to be. Additionally, you will probably enjoy your time with him each day much more (because of reduced stress). Finally, you still have some good years ahead of you and it would be nice if you could at least have some freedom to enjoy them while you can. I can also say that, if it was Karen making this decision about me, I would want her to put me in ... now. I would not want her to risk her own health....

All that said, please do what you think is right in your own heart. I truly feel for you—this has to be a painful decision and time.<sup>24</sup>

With her kids' affirmation of her own instincts, Jo-Anne went forward, transitioning Ansbro into a new home. Revisiting the matter several months later, she concluded that she had made the right decision. Ansbro was happy

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<sup>24</sup> Adapted from the fall 2008 issue of *The Thistle*, a residence complex journal where Jo-Anne Ansbro resides. She penned an article recounting George's experience with dementia titled "I Never Thought It Would Be So Hard" in which this discourse appears.

“most of the time” and while she is sometimes lonely, “I don’t mind being alone.” It’s a 10-minute walk between their residences and she treks it almost daily.

In the newsletter of the complex in which she lives, Jo-Anne penned an article about George’s current status. She allowed that a very common question Alzheimer family members get is, “Does he (or she) know you?” Invariably she is quick to answer: “Yes indeed George knows me. And it is his daily reaction of surprise and unabashed joy at the sight of me, followed by his introduction to one and all as ‘My bride’ that first made me think about writing this love story.”<sup>25</sup>

Do you recall how a bashful George liked to perform for relatives as a kid? In mid 2010, at the age of 95, he was still doing it! Frequently they put a mike in his hands on a stage before the residents, staff and visitors where he lives and Ansbro hams it up! His lifelong fondness for show business continues to win out over both stage fright and Alzheimer’s!

And after offering thousands of them back in the day, he’s a man who still needs no introduction.

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<sup>25</sup> “Bittersweet Episode” by Jo-Anne Ansbro, *The Thistle*, November 2009.