

## Annie's America

We are told that Annie was born on October 28th, 1922. If that's the case, her parents probably thought they were doing the right thing when they abandoned her to the care of New York's Municipal Orphanage. At least they were forcing the state to look after her which, under Hoover's Republican philosophy of "rugged individualism", believed:

"It is not the function of the government to relieve individuals of their responsibilities to their neighbours, or to relieve private institutions of their responsibilities to the public." (Hoover)

Annie's America of 1933 was suffering under the twin scourges of prohibition-fuelled crime and economic depression. For the history books of course, Prohibition is the more glamorous subject. Already legislated for in a number of states, prohibition became a Federal Law in January 1920 when the Eighteenth Amendment to the Constitution came into effect. Alcohol (except for medicinal and sacramental purposes) was outlawed. This law led to the biggest drinking binge in American history with organised crime illegally providing what regulated outlets could not. Underground drinking dens sprang up, sponsored and protected by the local criminal gangs. Because the law only banned the manufacture, sale and transport of alcohol, some people (clubs and private citizens) who had bought it before prohibition, continued to serve it quite freely throughout the entire period. This is probably why Oliver Warbucks is able to offer to get Annie a brandy at the end of Act 1!



Even prominent citizens later admitted the use of bootleg liquor. It was known that President Harding kept the White House well stocked despite having voted in favour of Prohibition as a Senator. The manufacture and distribution of alcohol was now the business of the gangs many of whom made vast profits from it. In turn, they would bribe the officials until, before long, the entire government enforcement agencies from police and government to judiciary was tainted with corruption. Only a few agencies rose above this wide-spread immorality: Eliot Ness and his team of Treasury Agents nicknamed the "Untouchables" was one.

Never had so many "patients" been in need of alcoholic medication: over a million gallons were consumed every year freely dispensed through doctors' prescriptions. Cases of brain damage and paralysis soared as, in this unregulated "industry" people were exposed to products of varying quality and toxicity. Industrial plasticizers, added to fool government testing, were responsible for the permanent paralysis of thousands of victims' hands and feet. Alcohol distilled in old car radiators often resulted in fatal lead poisoning.

During most of this time the population – or most of it – was fairly buoyant. America was rich...or seemed to be. Everybody, it seemed, had a well paid job and money to spend. And to help them spend, mass production made many of the chosen commodities much cheaper than they ever had been: cars that had cost \$1200 in 1909 only cost \$295 in 1928...the story repeated for radios, fridges, vacuum cleaners and so on. Also the invention of the concept of "hire purchase" (where you placed a deposit for your goods and then paid the rest in instalments at interest) meant that you could enjoy these things now. In 1928, President Hoover declared that America had almost delivered itself of poverty. He claimed that the saying of a previous president was being fulfilled: "The business of this country is business" (Calvin Coolidge). It was a bubble that would surely burst.

There was serious discontent amongst two distinct groups of the population: African Americans who were forced (especially in the Southern States) to live in poverty doing menial work for very little money, and the share-croppers (so graphically depicted in Steinbeck's *The Grapes of Wrath*) who over-extended both their borrowing and the productivity of the land. When the glut of food hit, prices plummeted forcing most of them out of business and to be saddled with a debt they could never repay.

America was isolated from most of the world (especially Europe) by aggressive trade barriers. What they couldn't sell internally, could not be sold. Eventually people realised that the promise of hire-purchase has a sting in the tail and their buying began to slow down. Production went into recession and share prices began to fail. As if this wasn't bad enough, the stock market had allowed people to buy shares by placing a "margin" – 10% of the value of the shares – the rest to be paid when they increased in value...which, of course, they would.

By 1929 over 1 million people in America owned shares...or, at least were committed to owning shares to be paid for by money they would never actually have. On September 3, the market dropped sharply only to rise and then drop again. They were like the tremors before a big earthquake but few heeded the warning. The market had sagged temporarily before, but it always came back stronger. The market dipped sharply again on October 4. Worry turned into panic as the market continued to decline. October 21 saw an avalanche of selling as many tried to salvage something from their losses. On October 24 - Black Thursday - the panic took on a life of its own as selling orders overwhelmed the Exchange's ability to keep up with the transactions. Some Wall Street financiers achieved a temporary restoration of confidence by buying as many shares as they could. Friday and Saturday saw sales drop and a glimmer of hope return. On Monday the panic started again, and then came Black Tuesday - October 29. The panic on the Exchange floor changed to bedlam. According to one observer, "They hollered and screamed, they clawed at one another's collars. It was like a bunch of crazy men. Every once in a while, when Radio or Steel or Auburn would take another tumble, you'd see some poor devil collapse and fall to the floor."

Recession followed the Crash and only the very wealthy were able to weather the storm. People could no longer afford to spend money and therefore did not buy consumer products. As there was no buying, shops went bust and factories had no reason to employ people who were making products that were not being sold. Unemployment became a major issue. Everything crashed on 29th October 1929.

The depression took a while to get going but by the winter of 1932 it was at its worst. 12 million people were out of work; 12,000 people were being made redundant every day; 20,000 companies went bankrupt; 1616 banks went bankrupt; 1 farmer in every 20 was evicted and 23,000 people committed suicide in one year – the highest rate in American history. There was no system of benefit for the unemployed. Charities such as the Salvation Army gave out free food and shelter. It is known that people actually starved to death. In some states men deliberately set

fire to forests to get temporary employment as fire fighters while farmers killed their animals as no-one could afford to buy them in the cities despite there being great hunger there. Many people became destitute setting up squalid shanty towns cynically nicknamed "Hooverville" after the President whom so many blamed for their plight.

As late as 1932, when things were at their worst, Hoover famously claimed to a group of businessmen "Prosperity is just around the corner" and although he did make money available for some large projects in order to combat unemployment, many of the Republican-led states (still believing in the philosophy of "rugged individualism") did not pass the money on. For many it was "too little, too late" and Hoover's administration came to an end in November 1932 when he was defeated by Franklin Delano Roosevelt in the largest landslide of the 20th Century in favour of a Democratic candidate.

Bringing "Little Orphan Annie" to the stage

It all began when Martin Charnin, Broadway lyricist, was searching for a present for a friend. The friend was interested in American popular culture and it seemed that an old copy of the comic strip Little Orphan Annie: Her Life and Hard Times would fit the bill. The friend never received this particular gift, so taken was Charnin with his purchase. Instead it gave him the idea for a new musical comedy.

Calling two friends, Charles Strouse and Thomas Meehan, (to write the music and "book" respectively), Charnin pitched his new idea. Both hated it initially but were eventually won round. Charnin's idea was not to do a "comic strip" musical but to use the essence of Annie's indomitable, ever-optimistic spirit to stand as a metaphor for courage, morality and innocence in the face of cynicism and pessimism.

So now it's important to relate the time of the action on stage (the height of the Depression, 1933) to the year that Charnin, Strouse and Meehan began work on Annie; 1972. Nixon was in the White House and rumours of dark deeds were beginning to spread; America was still embroiled in the Vietnam War and the country was in the middle of a deep economic depression. In the Land of the Free, Americans were overwhelmed by a sense of distrust and hopelessness. The writers saw a musical that would echo the times that Americans were currently experiencing (economic depression, hopelessness, political intrigue) – with the central character, Annie, standing as a voice of morality and optimism.

The writing was finished, other projects permitting, by summer 1973. but, (as Thomas Meehan puts it), "since writing a musical is a good deal easier than finding someone to put up the money to produce it, Annie didn't make it to the stage until summer 1976". It had a ten-week tryout in Connecticut where, amongst the audience was Mike Nichols who would become its staunchest ally and Broadway producer when it opened at the Alvin on 21st April 1977 and ran for 2377 performances.

So the musical that had set out to react to the America of Nixonian "black ops" and economic uncertainty actually opened at a time when America was feeling quite good about itself. Vietnam was over (at least the fighting – and the losing – was), Nixon had done the decent thing – at last (thus escaping the even worse ignominy of impeachment) and the country had a moral leader at the helm in the person of James Earl Carter.

Since its opening, Annie has been warmly greeted by audiences the world over. It's ironic that whereas those critical of musical-comedies generally deride the plot-deficient, saccharine sweet confections that are most shows, Annie – the most saccharine and simplistic of them all – seems to have been impervious to such criticism. Maybe it is because it has never tried to be anything other than what it is and audiences (and critics) at least respond to that degree of honesty.

Maybe that too is why the original movie version (1982) has been so highly derided. Despite being graced by strong performances by Albert Finney (Warbucks) and Carol Burnett (Miss Hannigan), John Huston directed a leaden, over-blown and over-complicated affair. It is unfortunate that most people now know Annie from this source. The more recent Disney version (1999) at least reinstated some of the wonderful production numbers excised by Huston and is an improvement, if a little pedestrian and with some unfortunate concessions to political correctness.

But the best way to get to know Annie is through the stage show. It's a simple story of a girl who escapes the clutches of a baddie, finds a dog and a brand new life in the lap of luxury...and changes the political landscape of America in the early 1930s. Nothing complicated about that.

### The Comic Strip Heroine

Although she won't look it in today's performance, Annie is actually 82 years old. It was in 1924 that Harold Gray approached his employer Joseph Patterson, the editor of the Chicago Tribune Syndicate, with the idea of a new comic strip. It was a simple idea: an orphan (no family to tie him down in one place – yes it was a "he"), pitting his wits against whatever villains and troublemakers would come his way and dispatching all with pluck, fortitude and courage.

Well, "Little Orphan Otto" became a girl (at Patterson's suggestion – there were already too many strips featuring boys and anyway he thought that Gray's drawing of Otto made him look like a pansy and he advised him to dress him in skirts) and "Little Orphan Annie" was born. Not a new title, Little Orphan Annie is the title of an 1885 poem by James Whitcomb Riley and a photo that has hung in a Philadelphia Gallery since 1909.

Gray's strength was his ability to weave a story that grabbed his reader and kept him coming back for more. Some of Annie's adventures would extend for many months, each strip ending in a cliff-hanger which compelled the reader to buy tomorrow's edition. Although they evolved over time, his earlier strips were accused of being very primitive and stiff; the characters being somewhat, well, characterless. Sandy, Annie's constant companion, is a dog...and that's about all that can be said of him. Annie's eyes give about as much away as empty circles ever can.

What was very obvious from Gray's work were his politics and personal philosophy. He blatantly used the comic strip in order to air his own world-view. It is no accident that Daddy Warbucks is a true-blue Republican whilst Annie's repertoire of pluck, self-reliance, grit and steel-hard determination conquers the most hopeless of situations.

It was a very simple formula – rags to riches and back again. Annie begins life in the most Dickensian of orphanages to be rescued (within two months) by Daddy Warbucks (who only actually adopts her in the stage musical). Whether away fighting his many personal adversaries, or Annie's adversaries...or everybody's adversaries – the Nazis...Warbucks is frequently absent leaving Annie to fend for herself for many months. In fairness, like a responsible guardian, Warbucks tries to ensure that Annie is well cared for during his absences but he frequently shows a lamentable lack of insight into those with whom he is leaving his charge.

Contrary to popular belief, Annie did not come up with the idea of the "New Deal"! She did, however, invent the "Junior Commandos". A sort of "Dad's Army" for American youngsters, this first appeared in Little Orphan Annie in 1942. (Long before most Americans felt that World War II was their concern, Warbucks was off fighting and Annie was having her own brush with Nazi submarines.) Within a couple of months, reality followed fiction and the Junior Commandos was launched for real. Described as "one of the most successful domestic operations of the war", by the autumn of 1942 there were "close to 20,000 JCs enrolled and filed under localities throughout Metropolitan Boston alone"!

Films, radio plays and, of course, a musical comedy later, Annie is still syndicated as a comic strip. Gray died in 1968 and until then he successfully peddled the cycle of Warbucks appearing,

disappearing and reappearing, Annie variously being the protected or the protector. Following his death, the strip was taken over by other, less able cartoonists. Popularity dwindled until, in 1974, the Syndicate decided that the best course of action was to re-run Gray's original strips. Following her success on Broadway and with renewed public interest, she was given what we would now call a "make-over", and under the name of Annie was drawn for two decades by Leonard Starr. Upon his retirement in 2000, Annie was once more renewed and re-vamped for the modern world.

She still looks somewhat younger than her 82 years.

Terry Foster  
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