



WLS Chicago

"Crew" of WLS Chicago's Showboat, the "Floating Palace of Wonder," weekly radio variety program, ca. 1925

WLS Showboat: "The Floating Palace of Wonder"

WLS Chicago, radio broadcast, late 1920s

[AUDIO](#): 21 minutes

Before the 1920s, *radio* meant a high-tech tool used by the military, shipping industry, communications services, and amateur "ham" operators to send messages via radio waves without wires—"wireless telegraphy." With the advent of commercial broadcasting in the 1920s, however, *radio* came to signify the must-have device that millions purchased for their living rooms to hear news and entertainment broadcasts. The first entertainment shows were not the serial dramas, soap operas, and comedy-star features often characterized as "early radio"; those arrived in the 1930s. Twenties radio offered listeners the same fare they could hear in theaters—opera, orchestral performances, vaudeville routines, musical revues, etc., and could read in newspapers—news, weather, stock market closing prices, farm updates, home management advice, etc., adding such features as bedtime stories for the children.

WLS Chicago, created in 1924 by Sears Roebuck & Co. to increase its outreach to midwestern farmers, offered a weekly variety program, the WLS Showboat, the "Floating Palace of Wonder." Every Friday evening listeners would "travel" along American rivers on the Showboat and enjoy songs performed by the Maple City Four and other groups, and humorous banter between the "Captain" and the "First Mate" (with sound effects largely produced by "Captain" Tom Corwine). This undated broadcast is archived by the Library of American Broadcasting at the University of Maryland. Listen to the [audio clip](#) while reading the transcript. What is the basis of the humor in ten joke sequences? What happens when the crew threatens to strike? Note the "Old South" racial stereotypes in two of the ten songs, reminiscent of minstrelsy songs. What other period stereotypes appear in the broadcast? From this example, what characterized 1920s radio entertainment? How did its content and delivery change in future decades?

[Brief introduction before WLS Showboat: station identifications—
 WSB Atlanta, WOS Jefferson City, WLS Chicago]

Announcer: WSB [chimes] — the Voice of the South; radiophone broadcasting station of the *Atlanta Journal*, Atlanta, Georgia, announcing Ed and Grace MacDonald, everyday Georgia folks in one of their homemade ditties, "Tote Your Load."

MacDonald: "Yes, sir, folks Here we go, don't you know . . . Yeah!"

Announcer: WOS, Jefferson City, Missouri. The King of the Ivories will play his famous interpretation of "Three O'Clock in the Morning." [piano]

Announcer: Hello, everybody. WLS Chicago, the Sears Roebuck station, broadcasting from our Center Theater studio. We are presenting Art Carn [?] and his Columbia Recording Orchestra in "Lucky Kentucky." All aboard for Kentucky on the unlimited train. Let's go, Art!

—The WLS Showboat, The “Floating Palace Of Wonder”—

Captain: WLS Chicago, the Sears Roebuck station. [foghorn] The WLS Showboat, the Floating Palace of Wonder, with its merry crew on board, starting off from the home dock at the foot of Clark Street, on another of its cruises anywhere and everywhere, wherever you say. First Mate!

First Mate: Aye, aye, Cap’n Tappett, Sir.

Captain: Have we got enough steam to start out with?

First Mate: I’ll find out, Sir. Second Mate!

Second Mate: Aye, aye.

First Mate: How’s our steam? We want to get underway.

Second Mate: Give me hot steam. [steam] All right, First Mate.

First Mate: Plenty of steam, Captain. We got 16½ pounds here.

Second Mate: 16½—well, that’s fine, First Mate.

Captain: Awright, get the gang plank in. We gotta get underway here.

First Mate: Aye, aye, Sir. Second Mate, throw out the gangplank.

Second Mate: Aye, aye, boss. [noise, steam, calliope]

Captain: Here we go up the Chicago River, heading out into Lake Michigan on the WLS Showboat, the Floating Palace of Wonder, with First Mate Ralph Waldo Emerson at the pilot house, the old steamboat calliope, Second Mate Tom Corwine, and the Four Legionnaires on the top deck. So here comes the Showboat, everybody. Here comes the WLS Showboat.

Here comes the Showboat!
Here comes that Showboat!
Puff puff puff puff puff puff puffin’ along—
Mammy and Pappy are feelin’ happy,
Shuf shuf shuf shuf shuf shuf shufflin’ along.
Each little choc’late bon-bon-bon-bon buddy’s in right
They’re playin’ Uncle Tom, Tom, Tom, Tom’s cabin tonight.
Here comes that Showboat!
Here comes that Showboat!
Puff puff puff puff puff puff puffin’ along. [foghorn]

Captain: The WLS Showboat, the Floating Palace of Wonder. First Mate!

First Mate: Aye, aye, Sir.

Captain: Say, those waves are sure high tonight. What’s wrong with ’em?

First Mate: Yes, Captain, Sir. We’ve had a lot of trouble with the waves lately, Sir .

Captain: Yeah, well what’s the matter, First Mate?

First Mate: Well, one side is higher then the other. We’re going to have to trim one side down.

Captain: Gonna have to trim ’em, huh?

First Mate: Ha-ha-ha-ha-ha-ha-ha-ha— Either that or get a permanent wave.

Captain: Permanent wave? Say, look at here. Here we’re goin’ swish swashin’ around sideways in this Showboat tonight.

First Mate: Why, it’s that old paddlewheel again, Sir.

Captain: I thought I told you to fix the paddlewheel. What's wrong with it?

First Mate: Well, I'll tell you how it is, Captain, Sir. You see the Second Mate left his laundry hangin' on it yesterday morning. Ha-ha-ha-ha-ha-ha-ha—

Captain: That's what all that red stuff was hanging up there on the —.

First Mate: Yeah, sweaters!

Captain: Sure—

First Mate: Ha-ha-ha-ha-ha-ha-ha—

Captain: Well, head over to the larboard, First Mate. *larboard:* left side of the vessel, i.e., port side

First Mate: Over to the aft, Sir? [?]

Captain: No, over at the starboard.

First Mate: You mean the lard barrel. [?]

Captain: Sure, awright, the lard barrel, First Mate. And let's have a tune going into the old Illinois river. Tune for all the folks in Illinois. [calliope] Here we are at St. Louis, First Mate.

First Mate: St. Louis, sure enough.

Captain: Who's that over there on shore?

First Mate: Well, that's Rip Van Winkle.

Captain: No, that's Jack and Gene. *Jack and Gene:* performing duo
Jack Grady and Gene Carroll

First Mate: Sure enough.

Captain: Can we pick 'em up?

First Mate: Let's do it, sir.

Captain: Throw out the gangplank.
[*Break in continuity*]

Captain: WLS, the Sears Roebuck station, Chicago. [foghorn] The WLS Showboat, the Floating Palace of Wonder. First Mate!

First Mate: Aye, aye, Sir.

Captain: Jack and Gene on board?

First Mate: I don't know, Sir.

Captain: Well, find out.

First Mate: Jack and Gene?

Jack & Gene: Yes.

First Mate: They're on board.

Captain: All right. Get in the gang plank. We're heading for New Orleans.

First Mate: Haul in the gangplank, Second Mate. [response] The gangplank's in, Sir.

Captain: All right, here we go on our way to New Orleans on the WLS Showboat, the Floating Palace of Wonder. And Jack and Gene, have a good time in St. Louis?

Jack: Sure did — . . . I just left my girl. You know what she told me?

Gene: No, what?

Jack and Gene: I'm saving Saturday night for you
Nobody else will do.
No matter how many others hang around,

Even my sisters and brothers I turn down.
I like my Saturday night with you, 'deed I do,
Because I know you like it too;
And if you want more than one day,
I'll not be busy Sunday,
I'm saving Saturday night for you, nobody but you. [foghorn, calliope]

Captain: Jack and Gene on the WLS Showboat, the Floating Palace of Wonders. And First Mate?

First Mate: Aye, aye, Sir.

Captain: Hand me those binoculars.

First Mate: You mean bi-no-CU-lers.

Captain: No, I said binoculars. Look at over there, First Mate. I see a whale!

First Mate: Ha-ha-ha-ha-ha-ha-ha— Why, that's a catfish.

Captain: Well, I guess I'd know a whale. You take a look for yourself.

First Mate: Ha-ha-ha-ha-ha-ha-ha—

Captain: What's wrong?

First Mate: That same old crack has been in there two or three years.

Captain: Well, you clean it up, First Mate.

First Mate: Can't get to it.

Captain: Well, look it here, we're down on the Swanee River already.¹

First Mate: Sure enough.

Captain: Better have a song for all the folks down South.

First Mate: That's a good idea.

Captain: Get the Four Legionnaires up on the top deck.

First Mate: Four Legionnaires!

Four Legionnaires: Aye, aye, Sir!

First Mate: You take care of it, Captain.

Captain: All right, First Mate. And now, Four Legionnaires, let's have a song for all the folks way down South.

Four Legionnaires: Down South, where the sun is always shinin',
Down South, to be there my heart is pinin',
Where the birds are singin' all the time,
Down home, far below the Mason Dixon Line.
Down South, where the fields are white with cotton,
Down South, when you're gone, you're not forgotten.
Sing one song for my old Kentucky home,
Way down South. [foghorn, calliope]

Captain: Four Legionnaires on the WLS Showboat. And First Mate, look-it there. A radiogram.

First Mate: What's it say?

¹ Not a tributary of the Mississippi River, the Suwannee River runs through southern Georgia and Florida into the Gulf of Mexico. The Showboat would not be reaching the river at this point on its imaginary route. Due to the fame of Stephen Foster's song "Old Folks at Home," also known as "Way Down upon the Swanee River," and the 1919 George Gershwin Broadway hit, "Swanee," many non-southern Americans associated the river with the American South but were unfamiliar with its geographic locale.

Captain: Why, it says “Bradley Kincaid, the Mountain Boy, is waiting at New Orleans with his hound-dog gi-tar.”

First Mate: Well, I’d say that’s lucky. We’re right across from New Orleans now.

Captain: Let’s shoot right over there now.

First Mate: Whoop, there we are now.

Captain: We sure made a quick trip. Throw out the gangplank, First Mate!

First Mate: Aye, aye, Sir! Throw out the gangplank, Second Mate!

Second Mate: Awright!

First Mate: The gangplank’s up.

Captain: All right, First Mate. [calliope]
[*Break in continuity*]

Captain: WLS Chicago, the Sears Roebuck station. [foghorn] The WLS Showboat, the Floating Palace of Wonder. First Mate? [calliope]

First Mate: Aye, aye, Sir.

Captain: Bradley Kincaid, the mountain boy with his hound-dog guitar, get on deck?

First Mate: He’s on deck, Sir.

Captain: All right, then, let’s get in the gangplank and head out of the old New Orleans dock here. Hurry it up!

First Mate: Aye, aye, Sir. Second Mate Tom Corwine, pull in the gangplank! [noises, calliope]

Second Mate: Let’s go! [noise, steam, foghorn]

Captain: The WLS Showboat, the Floating Place of Wonder, with First Mate Ralph Waldo Emerson, the old steamboat calliope, headin’ out into the Gulf of Mexico for New York City. [barking, voices] First Mate!

First Mate: Aye, aye, Sir.

Captain: How’d those dogs get on board?

First Mate: I don’t know, Sir.

Captain: We’ve never had dogs on the Showboat before.

First Mate: Oh, yes, we have, Sir.

Captain: No, we haven’t.

First Mate: Hot dogs, Sir. Ha-ha-ha-ha-ha-ha-ha-ha-ha-ha—

Captain: Bradley Kincaid!

Kincaid: Aye, aye, Sir.

Captain: You know you’ve got to work your way on the Showboat. Let’s have a song while we’re sailin’ along.

Kincaid: I’ve got a gal in the Sourwood Mountain, ho-dee-um dee-iddle-dee-day.
She won’t come and I won’t call her, ho-dee-um dee-iddle-dee-day.
I’ve got a gal in the Sourwood Mountain, ho-dee-um dee-iddle-dee-day.
She won’t come and I won’t call her, ho-dee-um dee-iddle-dee-day.
Roosters crowin’ in the Sourwood Mountain, ho-dee-um dee-iddle-dee-day.
So many pretty girls, I can’t count ’em, ho-dee-um dee-iddle-dee-day. [foghorn]

Captain: Bradley Kincaid, the Mountain Boy with his hounddog guitar, on the WLS Showboat. Why, what’s the matter, First Mate? You look kinda sober or sad. What’s wrong?

First Mate: I just seen that old slicker you gave me twenty years ago.

Captain: Has it been twenty years, First Mate?

First Mate: It's been twenty years. You know, those were the good old days.

Captain: They certainly were. Those were good ol' days, and you kept that old slicker a long time.

First Mate: I used to call you Harold.

Captain: Yes, sir, and I called you Ralph. You know, there was no formality then, was there?

First Mate: No, there wasn't any of that.

Captain: Remember when we only had ten cents to eat on for a couple of days.

Captain: That's right.

Captain: Went into a restaurant and bought a cup of coffee and a couple of doughnuts.

First Mate: Sure enough, I remember.

Captain: You took one doughnut and I took the other one, and we dumped 'em in the same cup of coffee.

First Mate: Yeah, ha-ha, and I lost mine. Ha-ha-ha-ha-ha-ha-ha—

Captain: Well, First Mate, it's certainly awful nice of you to hang on to that old slicker all these years.

First Mate: I'm going to give it back to you, Captain.

Captain: Give it back?

First Mate: I want you to fill it up.

Captain: Fill it up? What do you mean?

First Mate: Well, want you to fill up the old same holes that was in it when you give it to me twenty years ago. Ha-ha-ha-ha-ha-ha-ha—

Captain: First Mate!

First Mate: Aye, aye, Sir.

Captain: Get the Second Mate up in the crow's nest and get him on the lookout. Hurry it up!

First Mate: Aye, aye Sir. Second Mate, up in the crow's nest!

Second Mate: [Calls]

First Mate: Seems like he sighted the provision boat, Captain.

Captain: Provision boat, that's fine. Now we can get on to New York. Let's hurry it up and get over there.

First Mate: Aye, aye, Sir. [foghorn, calliope]

Captain: The WLS Showboat, the Floating Palace of Wonder.
[Break in continuity]

Captain: [Foghorn, calliope] The WLS Showboat, the Floating Palace of Wonder. First Mate!

First Mate: Aye, aye, Sir.

Captain: We certainly had a nice bunch of grub off that ship, didn't we?

First Mate: I didn't think much of it.

Captain: Why, there was fifty boxes of provisions there.

First Mate: Why, there was fifty boxes of bacon but no beans. Ha-ha-ha-ha-ha-ha-ha—

Captain: Heh, heh, that's too bad. [foghorn, calliope] The WLS Showboat, the Floating Place of Wonder, with First Mate Ralph Waldo Emerson at the old steamboat calliope.

First Mate: Captain, Sir?

Captain: What's the matter, First Mate?

First Mate: The Second Mate reports that there's an airplane above, Sir.

Captain: Hand me the binoculars. I'll take a look.

First Mate: You mean the bi-no-CU-lers?

Captain: Why, sure enough. It's a seaplane, First Mate.

First Mate: Yeah, it's going right overhead.

Captain: Yes, sir. Look at that! They're going down, they're down in the water. Hurry up, First Mate.

First Mate: Aye, aye, Sir. [Noise, voices] Haul in everybody.

Captain: Did we save 'em all, First Mate?

First Mate: I think so, Sir.

Captain: Who was it, First Mate?

First Mate: Why, it was the Maple City Four.

Captain: Are they all here?

First Mate: Sure, they come out to meet us, and, uh, and [] made a bad splash.

Captain: Well, that's too bad. Are you sure they're all on the top deck?

First Mate: Maple City Four?

Maple City Four: Aye, aye, Sir!

Captain: We're sure glad we saved you boys, but you have to work your way when you are ridin' along in the Showboat. Let's have a little song. Come on!

Maple City Four: Hello, hello, hello,
 We're the Maple City Four.
 We're glad to croon some harmony
 We hope that you're as happy as we.
 Hello, hello, hello,
 There is one thing you all know,
 And as you can guess, we're from WLS,
 Hello, everybody, hello. [foghorn, calliope]

Captain: Maple City Four on the top deck of the WLS Showboat, the Floating Palace of Wonder.
 First Mate!

First Mate: Aye, aye, Sir.

Captain: I thought you were going to get a haircut in New Orleans.

First Mate: I tried to, Sir.

Captain: What's wrong?

First Mate: I went into the barber shop, and I asked the barber if he wasn't the last one to give me a haircut. And he said no, because he's only been there two years. Ha-ha-ha-ha-ha-ha-ha.

Captain: Ha-ha-

Captain: But here we are in New York harbor. Let's have a little "East Side, West Side." Shall we?

First Mate: Aye, aye, Sir. [calliope, playing “East Side, West Side”]

Captain: First Mate, we’re all ready to dock. Get the gangplank ready; get it out.

First Mate: Second Mate, throw out the gangplank. [Noise] The gangplank’s out, Sir.

Captain: All right, First Mate. And now before we go ashore, everybody, so long to all the folks back east. Come on, Maple City Four.

Maple City Four: Sing Hallelujah! Hallelujah!
Just to shoo the blues away.
When cares pursue ya, Hallelujah!
Gets you through the darkest day.
Satan lies a-waitin’
And creatin’ skies of grey,
But Hallelujah, Hallelujah,
Helps to shoo the clouds away. [foghorn, calliope]

Captain: Maple City Four on the top deck of the WLS Showboat, the Floating Palace of Wonder. Docking at New York City —

[*Break in continuity*]

Captain: [foghorn, calliope] The WLS Showboat, the Floating Palace of Wonder, sailing out of New York harbor and heading for home. First Mate?

First Mate: Aye, aye, Sir.

Captain: We certainly had a nice visit with the folks in New York, didn’t we?

First Mate: Aye, aye, Sir, I had a fine time, Cap’n, sir, but I’m anxious to get back home.

Captain: Well, cheer up, First Mate, we’re on our way. Just passed Nantucket Island, so head right up the old North Atlantic around Nova Scotia, and we’ll steam down the St. Lawrence River. And while we’re sailing along, let’s take it easy on the top deck while the Maple City Four harmonizes. Come on, boys.

Maple City Four: Sailing, sailing, over the bounding main,
For many a stormy wind shall blow
Ere Jack comes home again.
Sailing, sailing, over the bounding main,
There’s many a stormy wind shall blow
Ere Jack comes home again. [foghorn, calliope]

Captain: The Maple City Four on the top deck of the WLS Showboat.

First Mate: Captain, Sir.

Captain: What is it, First Mate?

First Mate: I want a new uniform.

Captain: Well, we’re short of funds, First Mate, and besides, that looks all right.

First Mate: Why, I have to wear both sides of this one. It looks bad, Sir.

Captain: Why, what do you have to wear both sides for?

First Mate: Well, one side is the First Mate side, Sir, and the other side is the band uniform side, Sir.

Captain: Yeah, well, what’s wrong with it? It looks all right to me.

First Mate: Well, the First Mate side, Sir, is all moth-eaten, Sir, and the band uniform side, Sir, is all rat-eaten, Sir. And besides, it’s beginnin’ to look like a vest.

Captain: Well, I have it, First Mate. Cheer up. Summer's coming and then you won't have to wear a coat.

First Mate: Ha-ha-ha-ha-ha-ha-ha— [foghorn, calliope] Captain, Sir.

Captain: What is it, First Mate?

First Mate: We certainly made good time comin' down the St. Lawrence. Why, here we are in Quebec.

Captain: Say, that's fine. Now we can get rid of that load of hogs. Hurry it up, First Mate.

First Mate: Second Mate Tom Corwine! un[] the hogs! [voices, hog grunts]

Second Mate: Watch out for that big one there! Hey! [hogs] Awright, First Mate!

First Mate: The hogs are out, Sir.

Captain: All right, First Mate. [foghorn] Sailing down the St. Lawrence River and up into Lake Ontario, bound for home on the WLS Showboat, the Floating Palace of Wonder. Come on, Jack and Gene, let's have a little song.

Jack and Gene:

When the moon goes a-shinin'
And my heart goes a-pinin'
For my Blue Ridge Mountain home;
Where the pine trees are swaying
And the hound dogs a-bayin'
That it is where I long to roam;
When the sun comes a-beamin'
And I am starting to dreamin'
Of a place where flowers bloom;
When I get back again,
I'm gonna live 'til the end
In my Blue Ridge Mountain home.

Captain: Jack and Gene on the WLS Showboat. [calliope, foghorn]

[*Break in continuity*]

Captain: The WLS Showboat, the Floating Palace of Wonder, sailing along Lake Erie.

First Mate: Captain Tappett.

Captain: Yes, First Mate?

First Mate: We're sure havin' a beautiful trip tonight. Just look at that old moon shinin' up there and the reflection in the water.

Jack and Gene:

We are sailing along
On Moonlight Bay.
We can hear the darkies singing—
They seem to say:
You have stolen my heart,
Now don't go away,
As we sing those ol' sweet songs
On Moonlight Bay. [foghorn]

Captain: That's fine, Jack and Gene. That sure is pretty, just sailin' along, everything calm and peaceful and not a thing to worry about, isn't it, First Mate? First Mate Ralph Waldo Emerson!

First Mate: Yeah—what do you want?

Captain: First Mate! What's the idea of that kind of talk? Don't you know you're addressing the captain?

First Mate: That's not what I mean now. I'm going to strike, and so's the rest of the crew. That twenty-five-cent raise you offered isn't enough.

Captain: Come now, boys. Let's not have any trouble. Let's talk it over.

First Mate: That's all we've been doin'. There's no use. Come on, boys, are you with me? Let's strike!

Crew: [voices]

Captain: Well, that sure is a tough break, all right. Everybody's deserted me. Here I am all alone on the old Showboat, all by myself. [voices] But look, here come the boys back again.

First Mate: Say, Captain.

Captain: What is it, First Mate?

First Mate: The boys and me have decided that we'll come back without a raise. We hate to leave you all alone. So if you'll increase our grub to four pancakes instead of three for breakfast and give us an extry string of sausages, we'll stick!

Captain: That's mighty nice of you, boys. You shall have your pancakes and your sausages. [barking, voices]

First Mate: We'll stay then, Captain. Won't we, boys?

Crew: Aye, aye, Sir!

Captain: All right, First Mate. Head right up Lake Huron and bring the Showboat down to Mackinac straight into Lake Michigan and we'll soon be home. Turn right into the old Chicago River, First Mate, that's the way.

First Mate: Here we are, back home, Captain.

Captain: Sure enough. I ride up into the old home docks and put up at Clark Street. It's just a minute before we go ashore. We have no troubles, have we, First Mate?

First Mate: Not us, trouble, Captain.

Captain: All right, boys. Let's pack up our troubles and smile. That's the best way—just smile.

Maple City Four: Pack up your troubles in your old kit-bag
And smile, smile, smile.
While you've Lucifer to light your fag [cigarette],
Smile, boys, that's the style.
What's the use of worrying?
It never was worthwhile—so! —
Pack up your troubles in your old kit-bag
And smile, smile, smile. [foghorn, calliope]

Captain: The WLS Showboat, the Floating Palace of Wonder, back from another merry trip. Back at the old home port, WLS Chicago, the Sears Roebuck station.

