



Sunday, 1 August 2021

Tobacco Leaf Carusos

It was a case of advertising the advertising.

"Have you heard the chant of the tobacco auctioneer?" asked print ads in 1938 for Lucky Strikes. The question referred to F.E. Boone, who spied his auctioneer pitch during radio commercials for the cigarettes.

Billboard liked the idea, at least as a sales tool. In its May 8, 1937 edition, an unbylined writer opined:

Best commercial heard in moons is the Lucky Strike presentation of the tobacco mart auctioneer selling his wares. These auctioneers open their spiel on the final bid slowly, then work to an unbelievable rapidity of speech with a definitely liquid effect. It's impelling was a fine display of technical perfection, and education for those who go in for that sort of thing. Same material, presented from a studio, would have been terribly dull.

The spots were effective, but Boone almost lost his job. Boone's chant emanated live from Lexington, Kentucky and it cost American Tobacco \$1,200 a week to plug Lexington into the network feed. Several papers in late 1937 talked about having someone else do the chant in New York. But *Variety* reported "Boone has few successful imitators" so the solution evidently was to have Boone go to New York.

Presumably, Boone started off on the "Hit Parade" shows but he also appeared in 1938 on a five-minute syndicated show called *Lucky Strike Presents* along with two other auctioneers: L.A. Speed Riggs and Joe Cuthrell. Riggs later joined him on the Lucky spots on the various network shows.

The success of the ads brought up the obvious question among listeners: "Who is this guy?" It was answered in a syndicated newspaper column that appeared starting around Nov. 26, 1937.

Descendant of Daniel Boone Does His Pioneering at Microphone

TOBACCO AUCTIONEER BIDS FOR FAME WITH WEIRD CHANT

By NORMAN SIEGEL

NEA Service Radio Editor

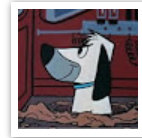
New York, Nov. 26—The "Tobacco Leaf Caruso" whose rapid-fire chant has become radio's newest novelty is a Kentucky Boone, all the way back to Daniel of the coonskin cap. Forest Boone is his name and he's a nephew four or five generations removed of the famous Indian scout of the history books.

Daniel Boone probably never suspected, when he began raising tobacco out in Kentucky, that his line would produce a new kind of radio announcer. But that's what happened when Forest Boone began opening the "Hit Parade" program on the Columbia network with his weird chant. Actually his announcing rigamarole is perfectly intelligible. It consists of a series of numbers and the words "dollars" and "bid." The secret of the confusion is the speed at which tobacco auctioneers, of which Boone is one of the best known, have to talk. Tobacco auctions are carried on at break-neck tempos in order to accommodate all the farmers who bring their crops to the big selling warehouses.

Has to Work Fast

A fair day's selling for Boone is between 300,000 and 400,000 pounds of tobacco. He has been known to auction as high as 700 piles an hour. The auction takes place in a huge warehouse with about a dozen buyers grouped near the auctioneer. An appraiser sets the original figure.

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Then Boone begins his work. The buyers seldom speak. Competition is keen and they'd rather not say what they're bidding. Each buyer simply indicates, by a series of almost imperceptible gestures, whether or not he accepts the figure Boone is chanting. One may wiggle the little finger on his left hand. Another twitches a muscle in his jaw. A third may wink, or tug at his coat lapel.

Boone never misses such a gesture of acceptance. Immediately he raises the price. His eyes are so well-trained that he follows this by-play with the greatest of ease, although he finds it difficult to focus his eyes on his own name on a calling card. He considers himself a sort of umpire between the warehouse and the tobacco buyers.

"I call the strikes," he told us.

He is also a little like an opera singer. He has a practical and instinctive knowledge of voice production. Although he never took a lesson, he talks about keeping his throat "open" and never "forcing a tone." He has learned to say "hawlf" just like a singer. "Forty" is also a danger word. It closes both lips and throat Boone modifies it to

something that sounds like "whorty."

Must Get Back on Job

He started in the field when he was 19. His only training was listening to all the auctioneers at the tobacco warehouses near his home in Lexington, Ky., until he could imitate some of them. Then he went to a Lexington warehouse and asked for a job. The warehouse manager let him put on a mock sale. Afterward the manager took Boone regretfully aside and advised him to take up some other line of work. He'd never make an auctioneer. Two months later he was auctioneering at Mt. Sterling, Ky.

His radio experience began several years ago. He has never been the least bit nervous before the mike, though he says he does miss the excitement of studying the reactions and the pantomime of his tobacco buyers.

Next month he'll be going to the biggest burley tobacco market in the world at Lexington to handle the sales. However, his chant will still be on the airwaves as it will be picked up from his hotel room. It's a voice you can't forget.

If you'll pardon the pun, the auctioneer chant was a boon to Lucky Strike. It got all kinds of free publicity in parody form on radio shows and animated cartoons.

Boone was already famous when Jack Benny switched sponsors to American Tobacco in 1944 and suddenly found two auctioneers (and several announcers) from New York opening and closing his show. His last appearance on the Benny radio show was Nov. 21, 1948. Riggs went solo after that. The commercials had moved to the West Coast in 1947; *Variety* reported the switch from New York saved \$100,000 a year.

Boone's wire service obituaries indicate he was still working until about the end of 1951 when he retired because of illness. He died of heart problems in Robertsonville, North Carolina, on July 1, 1954.

As for Riggs, he loved show biz. When *The Hit Parade's* Lanny Ross appeared on stage in New York in 1939, Riggs was part of his act, demonstrating how he sold tobacco. He toured selling bonds during the war. The Associated Press profiled him in 1952.

Auctioneer Chanter Has Envied Job

By Bob Thomas

HOLLYWOOD, Feb. 29—(AP)—One of the most envied jobs in all of show business is that of L. A. Speed Riggs, the tobacco auctioneer.

For 15 years his work has consisted largely of delivering his gibberish chant at the beginning and close of his sponsor's radio and television shows. The stint takes eight seconds. Lately he has not even been required to come to the studios. His chant is inserted by tape or film and his salary check comes in as usual.

Riggs is paid well for his eight second performance. He said he could not reveal his salary because of the possible jealousy of the other performers for the sponsor. But he admitted that he earned more than the \$40,000 annual salaries which top tobacco auctioneers can draw in their normal pursuit.

But even such a handsome deal can have its drawbacks.

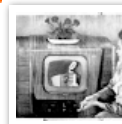
"For 15 years I was under exclusive contract," he explained. "I couldn't do anything else. The inactivity is almost enough to drive you crazy."

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For sidelines he had a ranch in the San Fernando Valley where he raised Palomino horses and white- faced Hereford cattle and invested in a print shop and a furniture factory. But even these interests weren't enough to keep him busy. So when his contract came up for renewal recently he insisted on a non-exclusive pact. The new seven year deal permits him to make outside appearances as long as they aren't for another cigarette. "Now I can do some of the things I had to pass up before," he remarked. "I've had many offers to do film roles in the past and now I can take them. I also have some ideas for a TV show for myself. One of them, called 'Beat the Auctioneer,' is being considered by CBS."



Speed is a likable leather faced man of 39 years and no stranger to appearing before the public. He first developed a yen for his profession at the age of seven when his father took him to a tobacco auction in his home town, Goldsboro, N.C. Speed was intrigued by the chant and began practising it. At 17, he was a full-fledged auctioneer, the youngest in the business.

Fate intervened in a promising auctioneering career when Speed was 25. The tobacco advertising genius, George Washington Hill, decided to put auctioneers on his radio shows and sent talent scouts to the tobacco country.

"I was chosen after they had listened to 42 other auctioneers," Speed recalled. "I noticed these men following me around all morning, but I didn't know who they were. Afterwards they made me an offer. It was much more than I was making—\$45 a week as an auctioneer and \$12 a week as a disc jockey, so I took it. I've been working for the company ever since." Also chosen was F. E. Boone who has since retired.

Speed hasn't done an actual tobacco auction for a couple of years but he hasn't lost his touch. "When you learn the job you don't forget it," he remarked. "It's straining work, not only on the voice, but on the eyes and mind. For instance, I would have to know at least 15 men who represent the buyers and keep my eyes on them for their signs. I have to know all the farmers and remember the tobacco that I had already sold and who bought it.

"I trained myself so I could look at you and also see what was going on many feet away. My eye doctor has told me that's the reason I have to wear glasses now."

By the time the article was published, Riggs was off the Benny show. He was phased out in October 1951. Eventually, sponsor announcer Del Sharbutt got the boot, too. American Tobacco already had Don Wilson on the show. He began plugging the tobacco (oh, there's another unintentional pun) with a chorus and then contractee Dorothy Collins chirping about it in song. It meant more money saved on radio to spend on television.

Riggs did some acting with Benny. He found himself part of the plot of the second-last show of the 1950-51 season where he gently kidded himself and his tobacco hawking style.

Tobacco advertising ended on TV in the U.S. on New Year's Day 1971. Lee Aubrey Riggs had retired by then and moved back to North Carolina about 13 months before his death in 1987. Something you may not have known was the charity work he was involved in. You can read that story [on this web page](#).

Posted by [Yowp](#) at [07:03](#)



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Mark Kausler 1 August 2021 at 07:23

All Done? SOLD to the American Tobasco Company!
Thanks for this interesting bit of smoky history, Yowp.

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