

Tukufu: We took the Manhattan Bridge across the East River for our next investigation in Crown Heights, Brooklyn. Our story starts at the turn of the 20th century. The main theatrical entertainment of the day is Vaudeville, and every American town has its own theater. It describes itself as Vaudeville, a show with something for everyone. But it's a world dominated by white entertainers, white theater managers and white booking agents. Vaudeville stages restrict black performers. However, despite this, a pioneering new act is emerging. John W. Cooper was an African- American ventriloquist. Not only was he black, but his dummy Sam was too. In these racially turbulent times, how did this unlikely couple make it? The current custodian of Sam wants to know the answer to this and another question on a slightly different topic. She thinks that he might have been related to the most famous ventriloquist figure in American history, the legendary star of radio and television, Charlie McCarthy. That custodian is John W. Cooper's daughter, Joan Maynard.

Joan: As I've grown older, I've come to appreciate my father more and more. He managed to make people laugh, but he didn't bring down himself or feel that he had to denigrate himself. I think that makes me so proud of him today. Over the years, my father's told me many stories, but there's one in particular that I've always been curious about.

Tukufu: I'm Tukufu Zuberi. I've come to crown heights to meet Joan and find out more.

Joan: This is Sam Jackson.

Tukufu: Wow! Now, this is very well preserved. Show me how he works?

Joan: Okay. All right. Well, this is -- whoa. I'm not a magician, but it's a mechanical thing. You notice how the figure is large features, large eyes. Because you imagine, this is a day before film and television. You had to -- say the guys up in the top balcony in the last seat, he feels wonderful because when this thing looks at him, he can see it -- he can see it move. It speaks to him.

Tukufu: Joan, what would you like to know?

Joan: Given the racial climate of the time, when there was serious segregation and discrimination going on, I wanted to know how John W. Cooper, my dad, and this figure, Sam, got a break.

Tukufu: So do you have another question for me?

Joan: I want to know if Sam here was made by the same sculptor that made the original Charlie McCarthy.

Tukufu: Edgar Bergen and his wisecracking figure Charlie McCarthy were arguably America's most famous ventriloquial act. They were performing from the '20s through to the '70s in Vaudeville, radio, and television. It's believed that Theodore Mack, one of the most famous puppet makers in America, made Charlie. I can see why Joan might wish that Sam was related to such a household name. Before I look into this, I want to try and answer Joan's first question. I know that New York in the 1900s was witnessing segregation and race riots. So how did an African American entertainer and black dummy become such a well respected act? I've come to meet theater historian Robert Snyder to get a sense of what Vaudeville was like back then. Can you tell me a little bit about the acts themselves?

Robert: There would be about seven or eight acts on a Vaudeville bill typically, and the acts were very, very varied: comedians, jugglers, singers. The people who went into Vaudeville were people who were talented

and hungry, who wanted to make a break for themselves in the emerging show business industry.

Tukufu: And what was the racial composition of the acts?

Robert: There would often be one black act on a big-time Vaudeville bill, but only one black act. On one hand, there was a lot of enthusiasm for African American performers who could sing, who could dance, but often they had to labor under the stereotypes of blackface minstrelsy, and that put a straitjacket on their performances.

Tukufu: Have you ever heard of John W. Cooper, a ventriloquist from this period?

Robert: Never heard of him.

Tukufu: Never heard of him?

Robert: No, no.

Tukufu: What would the likelihood of having an African American ventriloquist have been in a Vaudeville act?

Robert: He would have been really special. A ventriloquist who was an African American really would have stood out.

Tukufu: So John and Sam's act certainly didn't fit the mold. I've come to the New York Public Library for the performing arts to find out how they made it in Vaudeville. Look, it says in 1886, at age 13, Cooper joined the Southern Jubilee Singers. He traveled with this vocal group for about four years. For the season 1900 to 1901, he was signed on by Richards and Pringles Georgia minstrels. But it says here that he was also not the traditional singing and dancing, but that his act was more novel than that. He was a ventriloquist. He didn't wear blackface, nor did his dummies wear blackface. So he was in a minstrel show, but he wasn't a minstrel. The minstrels were an act that started in the 1830s before Vaudeville and Burlesque. Mostly featuring white men, they would often wear blackface and parody what they incorrectly saw as black behavior. Occasionally, African American entertainers joined the minstrels in order to bring their own dance and music to the stage. The scenario that he was most well-known for is "Fun in a barber shop." Now, this is a scene of an African American barber shop for whites. So white folks come into the barber shop and an African American cuts their hair, an African American shines their shoe, an African American does their manicure, and this was the scene. And so he would operate all five dummies and do six voices, if you include his voice. Now, part of this was that he was cutting the hair with his hands, so he operated all five dummies by using his feet. Cooper's ingenious barber shop act would have entertained both black and white audiences, but without ridiculing either. But how did Cooper get his break on the prestigious Vaudeville stage? All right, this is interesting as well. It says, "In the early part of the 1900 period, the White Rats, a club of union of white performers, called a strike on all of the high class Vaudeville theaters in the city. And this left the door open for many worthy colored acts, which had been traveling with different shows, minstrel companies, and the like. Got it! John W. Cooper broke the strike. Well, why not? What did he owe Vaudeville? What did he owe those white performers? So this answers one of Joan's questions. This is how her father got his big break. But I still haven't answered the question about Sam and Charlie. Are they related? It's understood that Charlie McCarthy was made by Theodore Mack, a legendary puppet maker from Chicago. It's believed that he called him Charlie McCarthy after his son. Joan remembers her father saying that Mack also made Sam. The New York Public Library for the performing arts has a file on John W. Cooper that might help me. There's just a newspaper report from 1939, but it shows what a rowdy place the Vaudeville theaters could be. So during Sam's act, he had indicated that he and Charlie McCarthy were cousins. And he says the reason

for it is "Because we both come from the same wood pile." A heckler screams out, "Why don't you get a good Technicolor mirror and you'd see how wrong that statement is, Sam." and Sam retorts, "Haven't you ever seen the inside of a turkey? You can get both white and dark meat there, can't you?" So what Sam is saying here is that he and Charlie are brothers, yet this is not the most reliable source. It is coming out of Sam's wooden mouth. What I need to do is find a more reliable source in order to prove that Sam and Charlie are, in fact, related. I've come to the Vent Haven Museum in Kentucky. It has the largest known collection of ventriloquial material in the world. Curator Lisa Sweezey manages 675 figures in a collection that spans 180 years. It includes a replica of Theodore Mack's Charlie McCarthy figure. Skin color aside, I can see they have facial similarities. They certainly look as though they could be related, but where's the proof? Do you have any evidence that our figure Sam was made by Theodore Mack?

Lisa: The Mack brothers published a book each year or every other year that featured the figures that they had for sale, and inside their catalog, we will find pictures of the figures. And so if you look at these photographs, either here or here or here, you will see Sam.

Tukufu: Wow!

Lisa: However, the figures in this book are not named and that ventriloquist would name the figure when they got him, so there's nothing here that says that it was that figure Sam. However, I do have a better piece of evidence. This is the correspondence file between John Cooper and W.S. Burger, the founder of this museum.

Tukufu: And this is in 1953?

Lisa: That's when he would have conducted the interview, yes. And if you'll read question number eight, it says, "Is your present, Sam Jackson, a Mack figure?" and in John Cooper's own hand, he writes, "Yes."

Tukufu: These pieces of evidence are good, but they've introduced a new problem. The 1953 interview with John W. Cooper is only saying that his present Sam is a Theodore Mack figure. It's an open secret that ventriloquists often replaced worn dummies over the years, so there's a chance that the 1953 Sam may not be the Sam that Joan has today. I've got no idea of our Sam's age, so I've brought him to show Alan Sema, self-professed dummy doctor. Alan has made and mended over 500 dummies and vintage puppets, including repair work on Howdy Doody. He's the man when it comes to identifying figures made by Theodore Mack. What do you think about that?

Alan: That's beautiful. Let's take a look.

Tukufu: What can you tell me about Sam here?

Alan: Let's move this over here. I think that most puppet makers will tell you that each puppet maker has his own like individual style, so even though they might make puppets with different faces, they all look like they have a family resemblance.

Tukufu: You could tell like, like they're cousins or something.

Alan: Okay. One of the things that we look for are things like the shape, the shape of the eyes. Okay. The type of eyes that are used, used in there. Now, this was obviously carved out of wood, and then a countersink drill was used to create an opening for a taxidermy eye. That's fairly typical of the period, too. One of the most telling things I've found in analyzing figures made by Mack is the cut in the ears. This is a

very distinctive feature. And we find that by making comparisons to other known Mack figures, we can kind of come closer to an identification. We can take a look and see if there's possibly maybe a remnant of the original control cord. The Mack figures had control cord that was very distinctive. It was plumb-lined. It was a green color. I'm looking now at the back of the jaw piece. I don't see any trace of the original cord, but again, that's not really surprising, really, because that would be one of the first things to be replaced. Okay. Now, the inside, the inside looks consistent with the way, the way the wood would have been scooped out on a typical Mack figure. And a door hinge for the mouth. That's very typical, too. I could be wrong. I don't think I am. But this is made by Theodore Mack and son.

Tukufu: Really?

Alan: I would say so, yeah.

Tukufu: Wow! So Sam would have been made by the same person who made Charlie McCarthy.

Alan: To my eyes, absolutely, yes. And in fact, Sam predates Charlie McCarthy.

Tukufu: Wow! He's his older brother.

Alan: His older brother.

Tukufu: That's fantastic! So this Sam was made by Theodore Mack after all. Sam Jackson and Charlie McCarthy are brothers. And with Sam, John W. Cooper seized the opportunity of a white entertainer's strike to become a ventriloquist on the Vaudeville stage.

It's time to tell Joan what I've pieced together about her father's extraordinary story. I was able to find out that Sam and Charlie are brothers. They were both made by Theodore Mack.

Joan: Really? Theodore Mack from Chicago?

Tukufu: Theodore Mack from Chicago.

Joan: Gee, whiz. Oh, wow! Sam, did you hear that? [laughter]

Tukufu: He was there, so he knew. He knew. Now, there's some very interesting circumstances surrounding how your father, John W. Cooper, got his break. In 1901, the white Vaudeville acts went on strike, and the managers began to hire African American acts. Your father used this opportunity to break in his ventriloquist act on Vaudeville. That's the idea. If you see a door, if you see a door with a crack in it, you got to get over there and push that door open as wide as you can.

Lisa: My father was the kind of guy who did that. I know that.

Tukufu: I know that you don't have a recording of your father's act with Sam, but I was able to find one.

Lisa: Really?

Tukufu: And I want to play it for you. Your father is 86 and he's doing his act with Sam. Listen to this.

Recording: "This is John W. Cooper of New York city. Now I want to introduce my ventriloquial partner, Sam Jackson. Sam, how do you feel tonight?"

"I feel pretty good. In the pink."

"In the pink?"

"Yes, in the pink."

"Why, the way you fell off of your bicycle, black and blue would be better."

"Don't get technicolor. Don't get technicolor."

"Well, Sam, I want to ask you this question: can you count?"

"Sho'."

"I'd like to hear you."

"one, two, three, four, five, "six, seven, eight, nine, ten, "jack, queen, king."

"Oh, no, no, Sam, you talking about gambling."

"No, I ain't gambling. That's the way I lose my money."

Lisa: I haven't heard his voice since he died, you know. I have to thank you so much. I don't know what I can do. Thank you so much. That's a great story. Thank you so much. Wow! Wow! I thank everybody for making this happen.

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