AMBROSE GEORGE THOMAS SAUNDERS
ARTHUR EDWIN HAHN

'UNCLE' GEORGE AND 'BIMBO'

George Saunders was a popular 'radio uncle' and, at the height of his career, he received 150 letters a day addressed simply to 'Uncle George'.

In addition to his daytime work on children's programmes, he read bedtime stories over the wireless every evening.

He always promoted good manners for children such as the occasion when he announced a whistling competition for boys and concluded with the admonition "nice ladies never whistle". [1]

George Saunders was born at Bourke on 16 May 1895 and, after receiving his education at Narrabri, at the age of 17 he went to the United States of America and Canada where he worked in vaudeville in Vancouver. [2]

He returned to Sydney in 1914 and enlisted in the 1st battalion of the Australian Imperial Force.

He was wounded and lost the sight of one eye on 25 April 1915 at Gallipoli. His sight was restored after an operation in 1936.

He was discharged from the A.I.F. in December 1915 but then joined the recruiting staff and improved his fluency by addressing rallies in Martin Place.

After the war, he began visiting children in hospital and he became known as 'the story man'.

In November 1923, 2BL Broadcasters (Sydney) Ltd., the first licensed radio station in Australia, began broadcasting. Saunders became Australia's first professional radio announcer and, with his fine baritone voice, he also sang in the opening concert.

Children's programmes were popular from the beginning and 'Uncle George' became involved with birthday calls, special greetings, particularly to children who were long-term patients in hospital, songs, things to make and do and drama serials.

Story-telling was his major role and, in 1926, he was joined by Bro. Arthur Hahn who was known as 'Bimbo'. Bro. Arthur Edwin Hahn was initiated into Freemasonry in Lodge John Williams No. 148, United Grand Lodge of New South Wales on 16 July 1951.

Uncle George and Bimbo not only contrasted each other over the air but the round-face, short and portly George with his tortoiseshell spectacles, was also contrasted in real life by the tall, thin, moustached Arthur.

At the end of 1927, the pair moved to 2GB which had started a year earlier as a B class station, the term then applied to what are now known as Commercial Stations.

Their programme was opened by Bro. John Sinclair Lumsdaine (1895 - 1948), songwriter, vaudeville artist and entertainer, who was made a mason on 9 May 1933 in Lodge Integrity, No. 449, United Grand Lodge of New South Wales.

Between Jack Lumsdaine's opening theme-song and Saunders' sign-off 'Good night, Bunky-doo', the impromptu exchanges between Uncle George and Bimbo always seemed alive and vibrant.

Saunders and Hahn were not content to be just voices in someone's living room, they frequently appeared in public between daytime broadcasting commitments.

The *Radio Journal* for 21 December 1927 advised its readers that:[3]

> Commencing from last Saturday afternoon the 17th inst., and continuing until the 24th, "Uncle George" of 2GB and "Bimbo" of the same station will appear at Hoyt's De Luxe Theatre, George Street, twice daily, morning and evening. The idea is for these two well-known Radio men to let the general public see what they look like and to entertain the "kiddies" who come to the show. Each child will be presented with a very fine coloured photograph of Uncle George.

The pair had an immediate effect on the fortunes of station 2GB. The *Radio Journal* for 11 January 1928 reported:

> George's cheery personality and his perchant for perpetual motion has had the effect of putting the station right on the broadcasting map.

> Most prominent feature of the change is the way he has carried his huge army of kiddy listeners with him from 2BL to 2GB. Saunders, in fact, is the modern Pied Piper of Hamelin. He called to the children from the Theosophists' microphone, and they followed him, and are following him, as they followed the Pied Piper in Browning's poem.

To say this is to cast no reflection on Uncle 'Bas' at 2BL, who has a huge following of his own. And he is adding to it day by day in a manner that shows he knows what to do and how to do it.

When 'Uncle' George was with Broadcasters Ltd., he conducted parties for children every Saturday morning at a big city retail establishment. So popular were these that frequently the attendances ran into thousands. There the children realised their ambition of meeting their Radio hero in the flesh.

When George changed over to 2GB one of his first moves was to institute similar Saturday morning parties at another big establishment. This was the acid test of his popularity.

The kiddies responded by attending in such numbers that the firm, as well as Saunders himself, were embarrassed. Since then, extra space has been provided, and the popular announcer has now more elbow room to shake hands with his juvenile admirers and say 'How are you, Jimmy - or Gladys' to them.

Having got into top gear, 'Uncle' George stayed there. He burst into some picture shows, giving his broadcasting talk from the stage, and rivalled Ronald Colman for popularity. Hoyts Ltd. are now using 2GB for Radio publicity.

Last week, Saunders gave the hospitals the once-over, carrying out the Santa Claus act for old and new juvenile friends.

Special promotions, stunts and competitions to attract listeners and boost sales for the station's advertisers quickly became a standard feature of commercial broadcasting.

The *Radio Journal* for 18 January 1928 carried the item:

Everybody wants to get a rise in this world, whether it be in wages, salary or position, hence 2GB is going to give a rise to a listener each week.

All one has to do is send in his or her name and address and say what item is considered the best broadcasted from that station during the week. 'Uncle George' will shut his eyes, and pick out an envelope. The person whose name is in that envelope will get a free fly over Sydney in an aeroplane from Mascot Aerodrome. Mark your envelope "Up in the Air", and send to 2GB Station, Adyar House, Bligh Street, Sydney.

'Uncle George' maintained a cracking pace and many a frustrated and overworked parent wondered how he managed to always seem so cheerful.

In an interview published in the 25 January issue of *Radio Journal*, Saunders said:

"Many times I have been asked why it is I never seem to tire of telling bedtime stories, and though it is very hard to explain just why this is so, I shall do my best to tell you.

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No doubt readers will fully realise the monotony of telling bedtime stories for 365 days in the year, and also the tremendous amount of detail that is required.

Letters averaging 150 a day have all to be opened, read, and every particular part underlined, so that nothing important will be missed in calling the little one.

I have long ago discovered that it is fatal to miss Jimmy Brown's new pup, or little Mary's dolly.

To many outsiders, perhaps, the job of being a 'Radio Uncle' would seem a very enviable one; but the general public cannot conceive just how hard one has to work so as to keep faith with every little listener-in.

The 'Radio Uncle' requires a constitution of iron, and he must be in that same good mood every time he approaches the microphone, for immediately he shows signs of strain, nervousness, or illness, that is at once reflected in his voice.

Again, with the large number of compliments and flattering letters that he receives, if he is not careful, these are likely to cause him to suffer from an incurable disease - swelled headedness - which, of course, means instantly, the end of him.

Throughout almost five years of my career as a 'Radio Uncle' I have taken unlimited pains to meet, mix, and be with children as much as I possibly can, with the sole purpose of understanding them; and I believe now that I understand little ones almost better than their mothers and fathers.

I have tried at all times to broadcast happiness and good things to try and uplift young Australians.

I may say, I am very fond of my work, and although the hours are long, I find a great deal of happiness in that overwhelming feeling that I am doing some good."

Innovation was then, as now, a basic requirement for the ongoing success of any radio station and Saunders began appearing at Anthony Hordern's on Saturday mornings and telling his stories to a live studio audience.

He combined department store visits with movies as the *Radio Journal* for 29 February 1928 advised:

Uncle George's new idea in showing moving pictures to the kiddies at Mark Foy's once each fortnight met with great success at the first showing last Saturday morning. It is the intention of 2GB, in conjunction with Metro Pictures, and our good friends at Mark Foy's, to show pictures of educational character, and, of course, only those of interest to children, from time to time. May we take this opportunity of thanking M.G.M. for their ready support and assistance in this innovation.

Arthur Hahn wrote songs for children and the *Radio Journal,* February 22, 1928 reported:

'Bimbo' says that he is shortly commencing a series of children's songs, which he, of course, will write himself. He wants to know can you suggest a nice name for a song, and he will write it. Already he as written the following:-

Sunshine and Rain; The Fairy Ship; Happiness Song; The Goodnight Song; and 2GB Topical Chorus.

Another innovation for Sydney listeners was the introduction of community singing, an idea first used by Melbourne station 3LO.

The *Radio Journal* for 14 March 1928 advised:

The wonderful success of the community singing conducted by 3LO has created interest locally. At the insistence of the Listener's League, the management of 2GB has been approached with a view of introducing the innovation into New South Wales. That station has gladly accepted the responsibility of launching such a pleasing phase of broadcasting. On the completion of the new studio, now in course of erection, Uncle George will extend an invitation to one and all to join the happy throng at the studio during the luncheon hour. The programme will consist of well-known songs, choruses and hymns, supported by the station orchestra . . . . . As the singing will be broadcast, homes will be brightened, and those in hospital will be wonderfully cheered.

When 2GB incorporated into Macquarie Broadcasting Services in 1938, Saunders and Hahn moved to 2KY where they continued their Children's programmes and community singing.

George Saunders left radio in 1940 and became involved in recruiting and war-loan rallies. He also turned his attention to the support of the Red Cross Hospital Fund.

In 1944, he married Ena Gladys Hayes [4] and, in 1951, he became Extension Officer (radio) in the New South Wales Department of Agriculture.

On the occasion of its 25th anniversary, 2GB celebrated the event by broadcasting a Silver Anniversary Show. Former personalities, employees and advertisers were invited as a studio audience and 'Uncle' George Saunders was thrilled to be called to the microphone by host Jack Davey. [5]

George Saunders developed a recurring illness in 1952 and he died of heart failure at Concord Repatriation Hospital on 19 July 1953 aged just 58.

Bro. Ambrose George Thomas Saunders was initiated into Freemasonry in Lodge Sirius, No. 292, United Grand Lodge of New South Wales on 14

June 1917 [6] and, on 20 October 1930, he affiliated with Lodge Double Bay, No. 331.

He was survived by his wife, Ena. The man who did so much for thousands of youngsters had no children of his own.

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NOTES

1. David J. Towler, *Hear Yourself Think*, Peacock Publications, Kent Town, South Australia, 1986, p.27

2. Geoffrey Serle [Gen. Ed.], *Australian Dictionary of Biography*, Melbourne University Press, 1988, Vol.11, p.524

3. David J. Towler, *op.cit.*, p.26

4. *Australian Dictionary of Biography*, *Loc.cit.*

5. David J. Towler, *op.cit.*, p.55

6. The United Grand Lodge of New South Wales, membership records.