

Claster's syndicated 'Romper Room' discovers gold in younger generation

An old row house, reeking with Baltimore tradition and cluttered with stacks of toys and kiddie gadgetry, serves as nerve center of a tv entertainment and merchandising empire that has been too busy to worry about the business recession.

The headquarters of Romper Room Inc., tv program syndicate, buzzes with "Do Bees," "Don't Bees" and a hundred other symbols of an enterprise built around the business of supplying little Americans with fun, education, food, toys and other items popular with the pre-school set.

Just before summer took over in Baltimore, Bert Claster, founder and co-principal (with Mrs. C.) in Romper Room Inc., interrupted a casual office conversation to answer the phone—which he found after a brief plunge into the litter adorning his desk.

Looking out the dusty bay-window at traffic on Baltimore's busy North Ave., Mr. Claster gulped as he listened to the nicest words a syndicator could hear: "I want to buy participations on every Romper Room program in the United States."

This happy request wasn't easy to fulfill because a considerable number of the 60 tv stations on the Romper Room list are sold out. The eager sponsor was Sam Weisman, head of the New York factory representative firm bearing his name. He purveys to jobbers a 98-cent plastic cup known as Merry-Go-Sip, which has a dome that spins when children suck drinks through a straw.

One of Mr. Weisman's customers, I. Lodge Co., Philadelphia jobber, had started sponsoring Merry-Go-Sip on Romper Room at WCAU-TV, that city, some months ago. The cups went so fast that Herbert Lodge, head of the jobbing firm, got on Mr. Weisman's neck for more Merry-Go-Sips and Mr. Weisman kept nagging the factory to ship them faster. After three weeks of Romper Room exposure, the cups were being shipped to Philadelphia at the rate of more than 5,000 a week.

Mr. Weisman's phone call to Baltimore quickly brought a dozen availabilities from the eight roving representatives of Romper Room who cover the four corners of the U. S.

The story of Romper Room starts with the pre-World War II desire of Bert Claster, traveling out of Harrisburg, Pa., for a firm building beauty salons, to get into show business. An opening developed at Baltimore's Hippodrome, and during the '40s he began producing shows for the theatre. This brought an offer from WBAL-TV Baltimore to do tv production. Mrs. Nancy Claster, a graduate of stylish Goucher College in Baltimore, was rearing three children but was delighted at a chance to write scripts for her husband's shows.

Together the Clasters decided to do something for pre-school children, spurred by daily goings-on at a summer nursery school Nancy operated at their suburban home. "Let's combine kindergarten and televi-

sion," Nancy suggested, a hunch her husband had been fondling for some time.

The two felt a daytime tv program built around pre-school children would draw an audience comprising other children, their mothers and probably many grandparents—an audience combining the desires of kiddies with the buying power of their devoted elders.

WBAL-TV went along with the idea. Romper Room took the air Feb. 9, 1953. The Clasters' belief that children are better actors than anybody was quickly borne out on the air. Nancy proved to be a relaxed m.c.

Sponsor dreams were nursed, of course. After a few weeks a large regional retail chain, Read Drug & Chemical Co., was approached. Ellis Meyers, then general manager of Read, was willing to be shown. A single announcement on Romper Room sold 3,600 Hopalong Cassidy 49-cent toothpaste kits.

Mr. Meyers was impressed—so impressed that he bought the whole five hours a week,



PRE-SCHOOL children provide supporting cast for Miss Sally, conductor of the Romper Room on WMAL-TV Washington. The program is carried live on three-score tv stations, each following the standard Claster pattern.

starting a Romper Room-Read relationship that still exists. Read now sponsors about three-fourths of the Baltimore package, which moved to WAAM (TV), now WJZ-TV, a year-and-a-half ago.

Romper Room grew into a syndicate when WTAR-TV Norfolk, Va., and WGBI-TV, now WDAU-TV Scranton, Pa., bought the package and sent girl emcees to Baltimore for training by the Clasters and their staff (one secretary at that time, 32 staffers now). Mr. Claster did the syndicate's selling and soon signed WTTG (TV) Washington and WWJ-TV Detroit. The WWJ-TV sale was the toughest he has ever made, Mr. Claster said, requiring a formal presentation to the Kresge Co. board of directors. Kresge liked the idea and a Kresge Romper Room was soon under way on WWJ-TV. The WTTG

sale was built around a regional drug chain, Peoples Drug Stores. Another chain, Walgreen, signed in September, 1954, buying five hours a week on WGN-TV Chicago. This contract is nearing the end of its fourth year.

The program is sold on a two-year basis in 26-week cycles. Few stations have dropped Romper Room, according to Mr. Claster, and most of these have come back or have been replaced by another station in the same city. Romper Room Inc. was chartered in 1957, along with Claster Enterprises Inc., handling, among other programs, *It's in the Name* in several markets.

Commercially Romper Room is doing well, with its list of sold-out stations and an array of long-time sponsors.

Take Taylor-Reed Corp., Glenbrook, Conn., maker of Cocoa Marsh milk fortifier. A Cocoa Marsh commercial handled by Miss Sally (Sally Finkline) on WMAL-TV Washington, went like this:

"Well look who's smiling? Who is it?"

(In unison), "The Cocoa Marsh Happy Lion."

"Why is he happy?"

"He's drinking Cocoa Marsh in his milk."

Miss Sally demonstrated the pump on a Cocoa Marsh jar that simplifies sundae-making and milk fortifying, showed a Romper Room premium ring, and added, "Enriched vitamins and minerals make you strong as a lion."

Six happy youngsters drank Thompson milk fortified with Cocoa Marsh and exclaimed in unison, "Mmmm. This is choclarific."

This accounts for the comment by Malcolm P. Taylor, chairman of the Taylor-Reed board, "We are very happy with Romper Room. . . This is outstanding. Keep up the good work." In Baltimore, sales of Cocoa Marsh rose last winter from 200 to 5,500 cases a week. In New York (WABD [TV]) requests for Romper Room rings averaged 3,000 a week over a 13-week cycle.

Other sponsor successes racked up by Romper Room:

Nu-Cushion Products, Keene, Tex., enlarged its factory three times in a year-and-a-half to meet the revived demand for stick horses.

J. J. Newberry Co., Los Angeles, increased its sales in that city from 30-40 dozen Tarco bubble gum banks (a \$1.49 item) a month to 470 dozen in one month.

Similar success tales are narrated by Walgreen in Chicago, National Tea Co. and affiliated retail chains and many others.

"There's very little sponsor turnover," according to Mr. Claster.

Ellis Meyers, as Romper Room's oldest sponsor, summed up the Read drug chain's loyalty this way:

"We like the innate honesty and dignity of Romper Room and the advertised items. Nearly every item we have promoted in