

See discussions, stats, and author profiles for this publication at: <https://www.researchgate.net/publication/261575048>

# "The Farmer's Friend": Radio Comes to Rural America, 1920–1927

Article in *Journal of Radio Studies* · November 2009

DOI: 10.1207/s15506843jrs0802\_9

---

CITATIONS

9

---

READS

62

1 author:



[Steve Craig](#)

University of North Texas

36 PUBLICATIONS 203 CITATIONS

[SEE PROFILE](#)

All content following this page was uploaded by [Steve Craig](#) on 01 August 2016.

The user has requested enhancement of the downloaded file. All in-text references [underlined in blue](#) are added to the original document and are linked to publications on ResearchGate, letting you access and read them immediately.

Running head: RADIO COMES TO RURAL AMERICA

“The Farmer’s Friend”:  
Radio Comes to Rural America,  
1920-1927

Steve Craig

Dept. of Radio, Television and Film  
University of North Texas  
Denton, Texas 76203  
(940) 565-2537  
<rsCraig@unt.edu>

Steve Craig (Ph.D., Florida State University, 1977) is a Professor in the Department of Radio, Television and Film at the University of North Texas. His research interests are radio and television history.

### **Abstract**

Nowhere did the coming of broadcasting have more social impact than in America's rural areas. With radio, farm families that were once isolated by vast distances and poor roads were brought into immediate and continuous contact with the rest of the nation. The United States Department of Agriculture was quick to seize the potential of the new medium and began producing weather forecasts, market reports, and other agricultural programming at an early date. Commercial interests also built stations and designed programming to serve the rural audience. This article examines the arrival of radio on America's farms during broadcasting's earliest years, from the introduction of radio in 1920 to the passage of the Radio Act of 1927.

*The radio will do a lot toward taking that long, sour look off the present-day farmer's face, it will keep the youngsters at home of nights, it will give the whole family entertainment and amusement, and pay for itself in a few months if use is made of the market reports. No farmer – unless on the verge of bankruptcy – can afford to do without radio. It's the farmer's friend.*

Clifford Farmer  
"Radio, The Farmer's Friend"  
*Successful Farming Magazine*, September, 1924

## **Introduction**

At the dawn of broadcasting, nearly half the country's population lived in rural areas. In 1920, there were six and a half million farms in the United States, and most were miles from the nearest city of any size (United States Department of Commerce, 1922, table 98).<sup>1</sup> Few farms had electrical power, and the telephone and automobile were luxuries enjoyed by only a prosperous minority.<sup>2</sup> For most farm families, life was rugged, sources of entertainment were few, and isolation was taken for granted. The arrival of radio meant that for the first time, news and information, sports and religion, music and comedy – all were available with the twist of a dial, even in America's remotest corners. This article examines the coming of radio broadcasting to America's rural communities, from its inception until the passage of the Radio Act of 1927.

In the 1920s, radio took the nation by storm. From the few experimental transmitters licensed at the beginning of the decade, the number of broadcasting stations grew to more than 500 by the end of 1923 (Sterling & Kittross, 1990, p. 632). Radio became a craze and receivers began to sell rapidly. By 1925, an estimated half-million farm homes were equipped with radios, a figure that would

rise to 1.4 million by the end of the decade. Even so, this sizable number of listeners still represented only a fraction of rural homes. Many farmers found it difficult to afford the new medium and the farm audience would grow to its full potential only over several decades (United States Department of Agriculture [USDA], 1927, p. 2; United States Department of Commerce, Bureau of the Census (Census), 1930, vol. VI, table 12).

Radio was seen as eminently practical on the farm, providing the latest weather forecasts, agricultural market reports, and other information that made the business of farming more productive. But perhaps more importantly, radio brought formerly isolated homes into close daily contact with the rest of the nation. This led many of radio's developers to believe that the new medium's greatest promise would be realized in serving rural listeners. In a 1924 speech at the University of Missouri, RCA's David Sarnoff argued,

Radio's greatest contribution to civilization lies not so much in what it does for the city dweller but upon the signal influence it can bring upon the life and action of our farm population. . . . the message that radio brings to the farmer is the message of human contact, human sympathy, and culture (1924/1968).

Others also recognized radio's potential for reaching the widely dispersed rural audience. Throughout radio's formative years, numerous groups made significant efforts to reach and encourage the developing farm audience. These early promoters saw rural listeners as distinctly separate and apart from the urban audience – to be sold radio with different arguments and to be served by different programming.

## **Review of Literature**

Despite the distinctive nature of the rural audience, relatively little historical research specifically on farm radio has been published. However, several historians have discussed rural radio in the context of wider events. Smulyan (1994) has examined the importance of farm radio listeners as part of the emerging national audience, and Foust (2000) has described the political importance of the farm audience in the battle over clear channel radio. Baker (1981) has provided the most focused study of farm radio with his history of agricultural news and information programs, and Wik (1981, 1988) has examined various aspects of the history of agricultural broadcasting. A number of individual radio station histories have provided insights into early programming and advertising aimed at the rural audience. Two of the more useful include the history of Chicago's WLS (Evans, 1969) and that of KMA in Shenandoah, Iowa (Birkby, 1985). In addition, a number of music histories, including Biggar (1971), Malone (1985) and Wolfe (1999), have documented the role farm radio stations played in the promotion and development of country music.

One area that has received recent attention by scholars has been the importance of radio to farm women. Smethers and Jolliffe (1998) have described homemaking programs while Riney-Kehrberg (1998) has published a study of the radio listening diary of one Kansas farm woman. Jellison (1993) has discussed the adoption and use of various new technologies, including radio, by farm women.

But the most extensive source of material documenting the emergence of rural radio in the 1920s comes from contemporary sources. The United States Department of Agriculture's Agriculture Yearbook provides an annual summary of that agency's radio broadcasting efforts. Additionally, the USDA conducted ongoing research on adoption and use of radio by farmers, and its Report of Number and Use of Radio Sets on Farms in the United States, April 1, 1927 provides both statistical data and numerous quotes from farmers' letters to the USDA detailing what radio meant to their families.<sup>3</sup>

### **The USDA and the Introduction of Radio**

During the 1920s, probably the most enthusiastic advocate of radio for the farm audience was the United States Department of Agriculture (USDA), whose official weather forecasts and agricultural market reports were among the country's first regularly scheduled radio broadcasts (Frost, 1937/1971; "Market Reports," 1921). By the end of 1922, some 85 stations, covering most of the U.S., were transmitting USDA-produced information on a regularly scheduled basis (USDA, 1923, p. 22).<sup>4</sup>

The USDA saw the arrival of radio as a boon in accomplishing its mission of providing information and education to the nation's farmers. The agency believed that instant communication with the widespread rural audience could greatly enhance farm efficiency and profitability, and so its earliest programming efforts were those the USDA saw as the most practical -- weather forecasts, so farmers could avoid the ravages of hailstorms and early freezes, and agricultural

market reports, so that farmers could time harvests and shipments with optimum crop prices.

Many of the early stations that broadcast USDA reports were located at land-grant colleges and universities. Land grants often had strong agriculture programs and close ties with the USDA, so the match-up was natural. These stations also worked with state and local agriculture interests to produce their own agricultural information programs. By the end of 1922, stations such as the University of Wisconsin's WHA, WOI at Iowa State College, WKAR at Michigan State, and Texas A&M's WTAW were all carrying a regular schedule of locally-produced agriculture broadcasts. By 1924, agricultural programming had become so widespread that the USDA called a National Agricultural Radio Conference in Chicago to set standards and coordinate operations (Baker, 1981).

Two years later, the USDA established a separate radio service to oversee production and distribution of a wider range of informational programs aimed at a national audience. By the end of 1926 some 90 stations were carrying an average of half an hour a day of USDA programs (USDA, 1927, p. 56).

The USDA's first nationwide information programming effort was The United States Radio Farm School, a three day a week, 15-minute educational program of advice on agricultural techniques. This first effort attempted to demonstrate radio's potential for agricultural education and, as the name of the show implies, the format was meant to reinforce the idea of a formal training environment. Farmers who tuned in to one of the 25 stations that carried Farm School found radio "schoolmasters" conducting "classes." Listeners were

encouraged to write in for enrollment cards and those who enrolled were mailed printed copies of the lessons (USDA, 1927). By the end of 1926, the USDA was claiming that some 500,000 listeners had enrolled, or about one enrollee for every two farms estimated to be radio-equipped (“500,000 Have Enrolled,” 1926).

The agency began producing other informational series as well. These were distributed in the form of mimeographed scripts mailed free of charge to participating stations. According to USDA surveys, by early 1927 the most popular shows included Farm Flashes, “a 15-minute, five-day a week noon program of questions and answers bearing on the most timely current farm problems,” and Housekeepers’ Chats, “informal, five-day a week, 15-minute programs dealing with plans for the family meal, budget, and other household information” (USDA, 1927, p. 7).

The latter program, aimed at farm women, featured advice from a very popular character named “Aunt Sammy” who was variously described as “Uncle Sam’s” wife or sister. Since only the scripts for these programs were sent to stations, each locale had its own unique voice for Aunt Sammy. When Aunt Sammy offered her listeners a free recipe book during programs aired in late 1926 and early 1927, the USDA received nearly 41,000 requests in a five-month period (USDA, 1927, p. 23).

Tracking literature requests was just one way the USDA attempted to measure the success of its programs during the 1920s. The agency also solicited feedback from radio stations that aired USDA programming and regularly sent questionnaires to county agricultural extension agents. One such national survey

of 910 extension agents found that 87% of them believed that farmers in their area who owned radios regularly listened to agricultural programs and 91% of them said that farmers spoke favorably of such broadcasts (USDA, 1927, p. 27).

The USDA also worked hard to promote the purchase of radios by farmers. Numerous articles, many of which were authored by USDA personnel, appeared in radio and farm periodicals during the 1920s touting the economic potential of radio on the farm, and arguing that, like other farm equipment, the radio was an investment that would quickly pay for itself.<sup>5</sup> These essays typically related anecdotes about how farmers had saved crops by hearing timely weather forecasts or had gotten a much better price at harvest time by hearing market reports (similar stories also appeared in magazine ads for radio sets) (Biggar, 1925; Dickerson, 1925; Farmer, 1924; Fox, 1925; Kibler, 1926; Mount, 1923).

Part of the USDA's eagerness to promote radio had its roots in national farm policy. During the 1920s, many farmers were struggling economically, but the conservative Harding and Coolidge administrations opposed government price supports. Instead, they argued that agriculture needed to become more efficient through better farm practices and that government's role should be to help farmers help themselves (Sobel, 1998). The promise of improved efficiency and enhanced farm profits through the adoption of technological advances such as radio matched this philosophy precisely. Consequently, the USDA used its radio programs to promote innovative farm practices such as agricultural cooperatives, crop rotation and contour plowing (USDA, 1927).

### **Commercial Interests and the Emerging Farm Audience**

While farm families apparently found USDA programs useful, the airwaves were also filled with an increasing number of entertainment programs being offered by commercial interests eager to tap the economic potential of the rural audience. One 1926 survey of rural listeners indicated that the farmer's favorite program type was orchestra music with agricultural information programs in second place ("What the Farmer," 1926). There was evidently no shortage of melodies to choose from, since one source estimated that, overall, radio programming was 90% music ("Radio Programs," 1926).

One of the more ambitious efforts to reach farmers by radio was launched by Sears, Roebuck and Company. Sears had made its fortune selling mail order goods of every imaginable type to rural Americans, so the promise of reaching its widely dispersed customer base through the new medium of radio made good business sense. In 1924, the company built radio station WLS in Chicago (the call letters stood for "World's Largest Store"), and by the next year, it had expanded the transmitter to a relatively powerful 5000 watts which at night could be heard in several states. Sears, through its Agricultural Foundation, also worked with other stations such as WFAA in Dallas and WSB in Atlanta to have its farm and homemaking programs air on those stations as well. WLS, like many other stations built by commercial firms in the 1920s, walked a fine line on the practice of broadcast advertising. Although announcers avoided direct pitches, the Sears name and descriptions of its products were frequently mentioned during programs (Evans, 1969).

In an early example of what today might be called “cross-media promotion,” the pages of the Sears catalog offered radio equipment for sale and promoted WLS programs while the station’s broadcasts served to attract listener-customers and promote the company’s name. The 1925/1926 Fall/Winter Sears catalog contained a two-page promotional spread on WLS including photos of the station’s musical stars and summaries of its major programs. These included everything from opera and drama to educational, religious, and children’s programs. The station’s R.F.D. Club was described as a daily farm program “with 15,000 members in forty states,” and featured not only the typical market reports but also “music that appeals to farm folks.”<sup>6</sup>

WLS was not the first station to recognize that the emerging farm audience had its own particular taste in music. In early 1923, WBAP, in Fort Worth, broke one evening from its standard music program of semi-classical and jazz and instead aired an hour and a half of square dance and fiddle music. This resulted in the largest audience response of telegrams and phone calls the station had ever experienced, and gave birth to radio’s country music variety show (Malone, 1985, pp. 33-34). The so-called “barn dance” format quickly caught on and was adopted by numerous stations around the country seeking to attract rural listeners.

Generally aired on Saturday night, barn dance programs were produced live before a studio audience and consisted of a number of short acts performing “hillbilly” music or rustic comedy. Some shows became so successful that their broadcasts became major tourist attractions – a must-see event for the farm

family visiting the big city – and many of the programs survived well into the age of television. The two most successful were undoubtedly The National Barn Dance, produced beginning in 1924 in Chicago by WLS, and the still-thriving Grand Ole Opry, first aired in 1925 by WSM in Nashville. In later decades, the success of barn dance programs became instrumental in the development of the country and western music industry. The shows made many country and western music performers into stars and created a demand for phonograph records in the rural audience.

### **Rural Stations**

Although rural listeners often tuned to the powerful stations located in urban centers like Chicago or Atlanta, other early stations were built in small towns and many of these also thrived. In Shenandoah, Iowa, two of the town's seed companies built competing radio stations to promote their products with the Midwestern farm audience. Station KFNF, begun in 1924, was operated by the Henry Field Seed Company, while cross-town rival KMA was put on the air a year later by the May Seed & Nursery Company. In the first year of KFNF's operation, the seed business of its parent company doubled, and visitors by the hundreds began to arrive to tour the firm's seed house and radio station. KMA was likewise successful in attracting a loyal following. When in 1926, KMA held its first annual three-day "Jubilee" with free food and live entertainment, some 25,000 people showed up (Birkby, 1985).

Other rural stations had fewer listeners, but also managed to survive, often thanks to volunteer talent and strong community support. Station KG CX, in

Vida, Montana, was probably typical of many such small-town operations during the 1920s. In the beginning, the station's transmitter was 7.5 watts and the town itself had only 100 residents, but a local bank employee operated the station as a labor of love. He would sometimes receive gifts of produce or poultry, but otherwise the cost of operation came largely out of his own pocket. In later years, KG CX grew and became more commercially viable, remaining on the air into the 1990s (Knowles, 1997; Krebsbach & Krebsbach, 1997).

### **Farmers and the Battle Over Station Size**

As the 1920s progressed, radio began to mature into a serious business enterprise. Large corporations with ample capital to invest built elaborate studios and ever more powerful transmitters.<sup>7</sup> The biggest players in this game were AT&T, GE, Westinghouse, and RCA, whose intertwined radio patents and business agreements effectively gave them a stranglehold on the U.S. radio market and led their opponents to dub them "the trust" (Barnouw, 1966, p. 122). Yet the addition of more powerful stations added to the already serious interference problems on the few overcrowded frequencies allocated to broadcasters.

To address the problems associated with radio's rapid growth, Secretary of Commerce Herbert Hoover called a series of four National Radio Conferences between 1922 and 1925. With participation by government and industry representatives, discussions at the conferences would ultimately provide the foundation for the structure of broadcast regulation as it was later formulated in the Radio Act of 1927 and operationalized by the Federal Radio Commission.

Corporate representatives from “the trust” dominated conference discussions and argued that the smaller, local stations should be eliminated so that a few large stations (to be run by them) could be clearly heard over long distances (Foust, 2000, p. 18). In fact, Westinghouse maintained that the entire country could be adequately served with only fifteen stations. Although Hoover was reluctant to go that far, in March 1923, at the conclusion of the second conference, he announced a new plan that permitted the more powerful stations to operate on newly allocated, relatively interference-free frequencies while smaller broadcasters were relegated to continuing to share a single overcrowded channel (Barnouw, 1966, pp. 121-122).

Yet this was at best only a temporary solution. It was clear that the definitive answer to radio’s problems would come only when Congress produced a statutory basis for radio regulation. Meanwhile, “the trust” actively sought support for the large station model from the rural audience whom they saw as standing to gain the most from powerful transmitters operating on interference-free frequencies. In 1923, shortly after the new allocation plan had gone into effect, RCA President James Harbord spoke to the Kansas State Agricultural Convention on the subject of rural radio. Harbord pointed out that he was a former Kansas farm boy himself, and said he sympathized with rural radio listeners’ increasingly serious difficulties with interference. The problem, as he saw it, was that the majority of stations then on the air were “technically faulty,” and he criticized them for the interference they caused the larger, more responsible, broadcasters.

Either the large station sending out important or entertaining matter which thousands of persons would like to receive without interruption must suffer such interference or it must yield time to some small sender catering to only a limited community which would itself be better served by the larger station. ("Broadway Brought to the Farm," 1923)

Harboard also complained that the smaller stations were even beginning to resort to direct advertising to support their programs.

Even Sundays are not sacred to these people, and the most touching and affecting church services are often interrupted by the raucous voice of some wide-mouthed barker serving an advertising agency. No profits from broadcasting are received by the large concerns except through the sale of receiving sets, and their interests are identical with those of the many thousands of listeners who are interfered with by a few thoughtless, or selfish and indifferent senders. ("Broadway Brought to the Farm," 1923)

Harboard's assertion that the large corporations were interested only in selling receivers appears somewhat disingenuous given that AT&T's station WEAJ in New York had begun its experiments in "toll broadcasting" some six months earlier. He also went on to argue that even with the allocation of additional new frequencies for radio broadcasting, "not more than about 50 broadcasting stations" could ever operate in the U.S. efficiently.

In 1926, with the recommendations of the radio conferences as a starting point, Congress began in earnest to draft legislation that would determine the future of broadcasting in the United States. Yet as the work progressed, it became clear that the interests of the farmer were not as straightforward as "the trust" had hoped. Goodman (1998/1999) argues that the Progressives in Congress (who saw themselves as representing rural voters) generally favored a system that provided for powerful, clear-channel stations. Yet, at the same time, they were also wary of the dominance such a model would bestow on "the trust,"

especially RCA. The result, as ultimately formulated by the fledgling Federal Radio Commission, was a frequency allocation system that provided for classes of both large and small stations along the lines worked out in Hoover's conferences. For the farm audience, this meant that not only would the powerful clear channel voices of the big cities be heard, but also the smaller regional and local stations that had grown up serving their rural communities.

### **Problems in Farm Adoption**

As the number of radio stations on the air grew, so did the sales of radio receivers. Like their urban counterparts, rural families began to be inundated by sales messages from the manufacturers and retailers of radio sets. Early in the decade, advertisements specifically tailored to the farm market began to appear in agricultural magazines. The DeForest Company ran a series of 1923 ads in the pages of Successful Farming featuring a contest that offered cash prizes for the best letters from readers on why they thought farmers preferred the DeForest radio receiver over other brands ("DeForest Announces," 1924). Subsequent ads were based on the testimonials the company received, such as one from a potato grower who claimed to have made a dollar more per sack on his produce, thanks to being able to keep in touch with current weather and market conditions ("A Dollar More," 1924).

Once the farmer had decided to purchase a radio set, traditional mail order houses such as Montgomery Ward and Sears Roebuck made the task relatively easy. These companies began selling radio equipment at an early date and by 1923, Wards was even offering a separate radio catalog ("Radio

Catalogue Free," 1923). Mail order catalogs of the 1920s typically included not only an assortment of brand-name receivers, but also a large selection of technical books and radio parts, appealing to the not inconsiderable number of rural hobbyists who constructed their own so-called "home brew" receivers. Buyers of the catalogs' more expensive sets were offered a monthly payment plan (Montgomery Ward & Co., circa 1923; Sears Roebuck & Company, 1925/1926).

Despite the best efforts of both government and corporate interests to promote radio during the 1920s, the adoption of radio by farm families came relatively slowly. While by 1925, 10% of all U.S. homes had radios, only 4.5% of farms did. By the end of the decade, the overall U.S. adoption rate had risen to 40%, but farms still lagged significantly behind at 20.8%. Yet this percentage still constituted an impressive farm audience of nearly 1.4 million homes. (Sterling & Kittross, 1990, p. 656; United States Department of Commerce, 1926, Table 529; Census, 1930, Table 60).<sup>8</sup>

A contemporary USDA survey indicated that farmers were reporting three main problems with radio: lack of money to purchase the set, lack of money to maintain the set, and heavy static and interference once the set was purchased (USDA, 1927, p. 25). A precipitous post-war decline in commodity prices had resulted in a severe downturn in agricultural income during the early 1920s. Farm bankruptcies skyrocketed and abject rural poverty was widespread (Quigley, 1925). Throughout the 1920s, relatively few rural homes had the cash to invest in such new technologies as radio, and for those who did have the money, other

innovations such as the tractor, automobile, and telephone competed for available dollars.

In addition, the earliest radio receivers were expensive, both to purchase and to operate, and to get proper reception from distant stations, rural families had to invest in better, more costly equipment. A 1923 USDA survey found that farmers who had purchased radios had spent an average of \$175 for their sets ("Survey Reveals," 1925). Once purchased, the owner also had a significant ongoing expense in maintaining the unit. Early tubes were costly and new ones were frequently required while batteries had to be constantly recharged or replaced.

The rate of farm radio adoption also varied widely with regional prosperity. Rural poverty was most severe in the states of the Old South (Taylor, Wheeler & Kirkpatrick, 1938, p. 114), and an examination of data from the 1930 Census suggests there was a high correlation between a state's farm income and the percentage of rural homes with receivers. While farm radio adoption was over 50% in many areas of the relatively affluent North and Midwest, it was as low as 3% in some poverty-stricken Southern states.

Especially deprived were the group classified in the 1930 Census as "Negro." Although census data on radios are not broken down for farm dwellers by race, the pattern can be clearly seen from the overall percentages. While 40.3% of all U.S. families had radios by 1930, only 7.5% of all "Negro" families did, and this figure fell to less than 1% in several Southern states. While African-Americans were generally among the poorest families and hence the least likely

to be able to afford a receiver, Smulyan also suggests that they may have avoided early radio because they found little of appeal in the white-oriented programming (1994, pp. 25-26).

Although technology improved rapidly and prices came down as the decade progressed, for most rural homes, radio remained an unobtainable luxury throughout the 1920s. Even a decade later, the rate of farm adoptions still lagged significantly behind that of city dwellers. In 1940, only 60.2% of farm homes had radio, compared to 82.8% of all U.S. Homes (Census, 1940, table 10).

Salisbury (1935) argues that another handicap to rapid farm radio adoption was the shortage of battery-powered models for a time during the late 1920s and early 1930s. The very earliest receivers were all battery-powered – many using acid-containing wet cells, but as radio moved into the parlor, this characteristic threatened to restrict the new technology's rapid adoption by consumers. About 1925, sets were developed that could be plugged into the wall – thus eliminating the need for batteries. In the rush to adopt this new improvement, many radio manufacturers quit making battery sets altogether. Yet substantial rural electrification was still decades away. While 85% of urban homes had electric service by 1930, only 10% of farm homes did, and it would not be until the mid-1940s that even half of U.S. farm homes were electrified (Census, 1975, p. 827). Manufacturers belatedly recognized the problem and during the 1930s so-called “farm radios” began to appear -- sets specifically designed for the rural market and offering consumers the ability to use any of a

number of power sources including dry cells, car batteries, or 32 volt farm generators.

Yet statistics on the adoption rate of farm radio do not tell the whole story of the new medium's impact on rural families. During the 1920s, USDA field agents were often surprised to find that significant numbers of rural residents who did not own receivers were still familiar with USDA-produced radio programs. The agency discovered that farmers in many poor areas would frequently gather in central locations such as a feed store or cotton gin to listen to the radio. In addition, the USDA believed that those farmers who were affluent enough to own radios were influential in their communities and often passed on important information by word of mouth (Salisbury, 1935).

Nor was it only agricultural programming that rural residents gathered to hear. In the often close-knit farm communities, relatively affluent receiver owners would frequently invite their neighbors over to share the radio. Barfield quotes one Southern sharecropper's daughter who recalled families from the neighborhood gathering every Saturday night at a landowner's home to sit and listen to the Grand Ole Opry (1996, p. 7). In a few places, farmers even created their own neighborhood wired networks by connecting several homes to a single receiver (Opt, 1992).

### **Conclusion**

As radio's first decade drew to a close, the new industry had achieved a form and sophistication of which few had dreamed a few years earlier. Although only a small percentage of farm homes had yet acquired receivers, the "farm audience"

was already rapidly becoming an integral part of the emerging national radio community (Smulyan, 1994).

Anderson (1983) has proposed that a “nation” be defined as “an imagined political community.” “Imagined,” he writes, “because the members of even the smallest nation will never know most of their fellow-members, meet them, or even hear of them, yet in the minds of each lives the image of their communion” (p. 15). Drawing on this definition, Hilmes (1997) argues that early radio helped bring about a Twentieth Century national American identity by enabling a diverse and widespread population to share common cultural experiences simultaneously, thus creating and reinforcing the imagined community.

For farm listeners, this was especially true. For the first time, radio brought the rural audience into instantaneous and continuous contact with the rest of the nation. With a radio set, farm families could share the daily experience of news, sports, and entertainment not just with their neighbors, but also with their urban counterparts thousands of miles distant. Just six years after the new medium’s introduction, one Illinois farmer summed up the impact of radio on rural America this way:

It has placed the world at our command, with its varied programs. It has shortened the long winter evenings. It has made it possible for a farmer to retire right out on the farm where he reared his family by dispelling loneliness and giving the farm advantages equal to town. It has given us the opportunities to study our own farm problems. It keeps us posted on the weather, the market situation, and the current events of the world. It keeps the young people home at nights. It gives us the most talented services of the city churches and even an occasional talk with our President. (USDA, 1927, p. 20)

The coming of radio during the 1920s made an essential contribution to the making of the imagined nation and brought rural and urban America together as a cultural community.

### Footnotes

<sup>1</sup> In 1920, the Bureau of the Census defined as “rural” those areas outside of towns with populations of 2,500 or more. Some census statistics also distinguish between “rural farm families” and “rural non-farm families,” with the two groups being approximately equal in size in 1930. For stylistic reasons, I have used the terms “rural” and “farm” interchangeably herein to refer to rural farm families. While non-farm rural dwellers doubtless shared many of the social characteristics of these farm families, census data suggest that they were somewhat more prosperous and, by 1930, were more likely to own a radio (Census, 1930, Table 60).

<sup>2</sup> According to data gathered for the 1920 Census and reported in the 1921 *Yearbook of Agriculture* (1922), 7% of U.S. farms had electricity, 38.7% had telephones, and 30.7% had automobiles. Yet even this limited modernization was unevenly distributed. While many prosperous midwestern farmers could afford such conveniences, few in the impoverished South could do so. Iowa, for example, reported 86% of its farms with telephones and 73% with automobiles, but in Mississippi, the rates were 10.4% and 5.5% respectively (pp. 788-789).

<sup>3</sup> However, these materials must be approached with some caution. During the 1920s, the USDA embarked on an extensive campaign to convince farmers to adopt radio as a pathway to economic self-improvement. As a result, government-produced materials of the time were largely promotional and downplayed the problems farmers had in purchasing and operating early

receivers. Additionally, many news articles on farm broadcasting found in the popular press were based on information reported in optimistic USDA news releases. See, for example, "Survey Reveals," 1924; "Survey Reveals," 1925; and "Survey Shows," 1925.

<sup>4</sup> In these first days of broadcasting, official government reports, such as those produced by the USDA, were required to be broadcast on a frequency of 485 meters (620 kHz) while all other programming was to be transmitted on 360 meters (833 kHz). Stations would typically shift frequencies to rebroadcast the official government program then shift back to carry regular programming. WFAA in Dallas was probably typical. Its 1922 daily program schedule began with a weather forecast on 485 meters at 12:30 p.m., a shift to 360 meters at 12:45 to carry a program of music, news and local market reports, a shift back to 485 meters at 6:50 p.m. for the official government market report, then a final shift to 485 meters for the remainder of the evening ("News Radio Plant," 1922). The shifting ended in mid-1923 when the rules were changed and additional frequencies were allocated for broadcasting.

<sup>5</sup> A sample of the articles authored by USDA personnel includes Gilbert, 1925; Eisenhower, 1926; and Pickard, 1926.

<sup>6</sup> The catalog explained that the letters stood for "Radio Farmers' Democracy," and that farm radio owners could "join" the club simply by sending the station a letter with a programming suggestion.

<sup>7</sup> By mid-1925, GE had already developed and was operating an experimental 50,000 watt “superpower” transmitter (“Bureau Tells,” 1925).

<sup>8</sup> Among rural nonfarm homes, the adoption rate by 1930 was 33.7%, representing an additional 2 radio million homes in rural areas.

## References

Anderson, B. (1983). [Imagined communities: Reflections on the origin and spread of nationalism](#). London: Verso.

Baker, J. C. (1981). [Farm broadcasting: The first sixty years](#). Ames, IA: Iowa State University Press.

Barfield, R. (1996). [Listening to radio, 1920-1950](#). Westport, Connecticut: Praeger.

Barnouw. (1966). [A tower in Babel: A history of broadcasting in the United States, Volume I - to 1933](#). New York: Oxford University Press.

Biggar, G. C. (1925, November). What farm folks are getting by radio. [Successful Farming](#), 56-57.

Biggar, G. C. (1971, August). The WLS National Barn Dance story: The early years. [John Edwards Memorial Foundation Quarterly](#), 7, 105-112.

Birkby, R. (1985). [KMA radio: The first sixty years](#). Shenandoah, Iowa: May Broadcasting Company.

Broadway brought to the farm, lonely days ended by radio. (1923, February 4). [The New York Times](#), sec. VIII, p. 10.

Bureau tells of super-test made by WGY. (1925, September 13). [The New York Times](#), sec. XI, p. 6.

De Forest announces prize winners! [advertisement for De Forest]. (1924, February). [Successful Farming](#), p. 127.

Dickerson, I. W. (1925, November 13). Radio and the farm. Wallaces' Farmer, p. 8.

A dollar more per sack for potatoes -- thanks to DeForest [advertisement for DeForest]. (1924, January). Successful Farming, p. 83.

Eisenhower, M. S. (1926, October). Uncle Sam chats with his dairymen. Radio Age: The Magazine of the Hour, pp. 37-40.

Evans, J. F. (1969). Prairie Farmer and WLS. Chicago: University of Illinois Press.

Farmer, C. (1924, September). Radio, the farmer's friend. Successful Farming, pp. 40-41.

500,000 have enrolled in radio farm school. (1926, December 12). The New York Times, sec. IX, p. 16.

Foust, J. C. (2000). Big voices of the air: The battle over clear channel radio. Ames, Iowa: Iowa State University Press.

Fox, K. (1925, September). What our readers say about their radios. Successful Farming, p. 46.

Frost, J., S.E. (1937). Education's own stations. Chicago: University of Illinois (1971 reprint by Arno Press).

Gilbert, J. C. (1925, March). Rural life modernized. The Wireless Age, pp. 24-27, 69.

Goodman, M. (1998/1999). The Radio Act of 1927 as a product of progressivism. Media History Monographs, 2 (2) Retrieved October 10, 2000

from the World Wide Web: <http://www.scripps.ohiou.edu/mediahistory/mhjour2-2.htm>

Hilmes, M. (1997). Radio voices: American broadcasting, 1922-1952. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press.

Jellison, K. (1993). Entitled to power: Farm women and technology, 1913-1963. Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina.

Kibler, H. R. (1926, October). Sets that earn income. Popular Radio, 10, pp. 524-527.

Knowles, B. (1997). KGCG, 'The Voice of Cow Creek'. Montana: The Magazine of Western History, 47(1), pp. 48-59.

Krebsbach, C., & Krebsbach, K. (1997). KGCG, 'not a pretentious operation'. Montana: The Magazine of Western History, 47(1), pp. 60-67.

Malone, B. C. (1985). Country music, U.S.A. (Revised ed.). Austin, Texas: University of Texas Press.

Market reports by wireless: A Real service by the Bureau of Markets. (1921, May). Successful Farming, p.12.

Montgomery Ward and Company. (circa 1923). Radio equipment [mail order catalog]. Chicago: Montgomery Ward and Company.

Mount, H. A. (1923, August). Radio -- the new farm hand. Popular Radio, 4, pp. 150-156.

News radio plant tuned and ready. (1922, June 26). The Dallas Morning News, pp. 1-2.

Opt, S. K. (1992). The development of rural wired radio systems in upstate South Carolina. *Journal of Radio Studies*, 1, pp. 71-81.

Pickard, S. (1926, August). National radio farm school. *Radio Age: The Magazine of the Hour*, pp. 19-21.

Quigley, J. W. (1925, July 29). The deflated farmer. *The Nation*, 121, pp. 140-141.

Radio catalogue free [advertisement for Montgomery Ward & Co.]. (1923, March). *Popular Radio*, p. 47.

Radio programs are ninety percent music. (1926, November). *Popular Radio*, p. 720.

Riney-Kehrberg, P. (1998). The radio diary of Mary Dyck, 1936-1955: The listening habits of a Kansas farm woman. *Journal of Radio Studies*, 5(2), pp. 66-79.

Salisbury, M. (1935). Radio and the farmer. *The Annals of the American Academy of Political and Social Sciences*, 177, pp. 141-146.

Sarnoff, D. (1968). Radio and the farmer. In D. Sarnoff (Ed.), *Looking Ahead: The Papers of David Sarnoff* (pp. 52-54). New York: McGraw-Hill.

Sears Roebuck and Company Fall/Winter catalog 1925/1926. (1925/1926). Chicago, IL: Sears Roebuck and Company.

Smethers, J. S., & Jolliffe, L. (1998). Homemaking programs: The recipe for reaching women listeners on the Midwest's local radio. *Journalism History*, 24(4), pp. 138-147.

Smulyan, S. (1994). Selling radio. Washington, DC: Smithsonian Institution.

Sobel, R. (1998). Coolidge: An American enigma. Washington, D.C.: Regnery Publishing, Inc.

Sterling, C. H., & Kittross, J. M. (1990). Stay tuned: A concise history of American broadcasting. (2nd ed.). Belmont, CA: Wadsworth.

Survey reveals how radio is serving American farmers. (1924, November 16). The New York Times, sec. IX, p. 15.

Survey reveals radio sets on farms now total 553,000. (1925, December 13). The New York Times, sec IX, p. 15.

Survey shows 553,003 sets on farms. (1925, September 27). The New York Times, sec. VIII, p. 18.

Taylor, C. C., Wheeler, H. W., & Kirkpatrick, E. L. (1938). Disadvantaged classes in American agriculture (Social Research Rep. No. VIII). Washington, DC: U.S. Department of Agriculture, The Farm Security Administration and The Bureau of Agricultural Economics.

United States Department of Agriculture. (1922). Agriculture Yearbook, 1921. Washington, DC: U.S. Government Printing Office.

United States Department of Agriculture. (1923). Market news service. In Agriculture Yearbook, 1922 (pp. 22-23). Washington, DC: U.S. Government Printing Office.

United States Department of Agriculture. (1927). Report of Number and Use of Radio Sets on Farms in the United States, April; 1, 1927. Washington, DC: Radio Service, USDA.

U.S. Department of Commerce, Bureau of Foreign and Domestic Commerce. (1922). Statistical abstract of the United States, 1921. Washington, DC: United States Government Printing Office.

U.S. Department of Commerce, Bureau of Foreign and Domestic Commerce. (1926). Statistical abstract of the United States, 1925. Washington, DC: United States Government Printing Office.

U.S. Department of Commerce, Bureau of the Census. (1930). Fifteenth Census of the United States: 1930. (Vol. VI (Population)). Washington, DC: United States Government Printing Office.

U.S. Department of Commerce, Bureau of the Census. (1940). Sixteenth Census of the United States: 1940. (Vol. II, Part I (Housing)). Washington, DC: United States Government Printing Office.

U.S. Department of Commerce, Bureau of the Census. (1975). Historical statistics of the United States, colonial times to 1970. (Part 2). Washington, DC: United States Government Printing Office.

What the farmer listens to. (1926, August). Radio Broadcast, pp. 316-317.

Wik, R. M. (1981). The radio in rural America during the 1920's. Agricultural History, 55(4), pp. 339-350.

Wik, R. M. (1988). The USDA and the development of radio in rural America. Agricultural History, 62(2), pp. 177-188.

Wolfe, C. K. (1999). A good-natured riot: The birth of the Grand Ole Opry.  
Nashville, Tennessee: Country Music Foundation Press and Vanderbilt  
University Press.

