

# Appalachian Journal



A REGIONAL STUDIES REVIEW

Volume 46 Numbers 3-4 • Spring / Summer 2019

## CONTRIBUTORS

- ☞ Amy Price Azano  
Gary Boye
- ☞ Sunshine Liberty Brosi  
Theresa L. Burriss  
Fred Chappell
- ☞ Connie Jordan Green  
Tom Hansell  
Michael Henson  
Rebecca Branson Jones  
Waltr Lane
- ☞ Jim Long  
George Ella Lyon
- ☞ Ethan Mannon
- ☞ Micah McCrotty
- ☞ Susan J. Mitchell  
Phillip J. Obermiller  
Conrad Ostwalt
- ☞ Mark Powell
- ☞ Elaine McMillion Sheldon
- ☞ Rondalyn V. Whitney
  
- ☞ First-time contributors to  
*AppalJ*

**Editor:** Sandra L. Ballard

**Assistant Editor:** Christopher Ryan McCloud

**Design & typesetting:** Ed Gaither, Modern Electrographic

**Editorial Board:** Patricia D. Beaver, Anna Creadick, Ronald D. Eller, Stephen L. Fisher, John Gaventa, John C. Inscoc, Helen M. Lewis, Thomas McGowan, Gordon B. McKinney, William R. Schumann, Bruce E. Stewart, David S. Walls, David E. Whisnant, John Alexander Williams.

**Appalachian State University Advisory Committee:** Cecelia Conway, Tom Hansell, Fred J. Hay, Katherine E. Ledford, Lynn Moss Sanders, William R. Schumann, Dean Williams (*ex-officio*). Emeritus: Patricia D. Beaver, Howard Dorgan (1932-2012), Susan E. Keefe, W.H. Ward, Charles A. Watkins, John Alexander Williams

*AppalJ* is an interdisciplinary journal featuring field research, interviews, and other scholarly studies of history, politics, economics, culture, folklore, literature, music, ecology, and a variety of other topics, as well as reviews of books, films, and recordings—all dealing with the region of the Appalachian mountains.

*AppalJ*, founded in 1972 and published quarterly by the Center for Appalachian Studies at Appalachian State University, invites appropriate submissions: *Appalachian Journal*, Belk Library, Appalachian State University, Boone, NC 28608.

Contact the editor: ballardsl@appstate.edu

**Subscriptions (for individuals):**

\$24.00 per year (four numbers)/\$30.00 (international)

\$36.00 for two years (eight numbers)/\$42.00 (international)

\$48.00 for three years (twelve numbers)/ \$54.00 (international)

**For more information, and for library subscription rates, please visit our website: [www.appjournal.appstate.edu](http://www.appjournal.appstate.edu)**

*AppalJ* is dedicated to fostering diversity of opinion; the viewpoints expressed in these pages are those of the authors and do not necessarily represent opinions of the editor, the Board, or Appalachian State University.

***Appalachian Journal*** is a member of the Council of Editors of Learned Journals (CELJ) and is indexed and/or abstracted by many services including

*ABC Pol Sci: Advance Bibliography of Contents, Political Science & Government*

*ABELL: Annual Bibliography of English Language & Literature*

*AES: Abstract of English Studies*

*American: History & Life with Full Text*

*Appalachian Outlook*

*Arts & Humanities Citation Index*

*Bibliography of Native North Americans*

*CIJE: Current Index to Journals in Education*

*Current Contents (in Dialog #440)*

*Family & Society Studies Worldwide*

*Gender Studies Database*

*Historical Abstracts with Full Text*

*Humanities International Complete*

*Humanities International Index (formerly American Humanities Index)*

*ERIC [Educational Resources Education Center]*

*Family and Society Studies Worldwide*

*Historical Abstracts*

*Ingentia ConnectComplete*

*Journal of Appalachian Studies*

*JSTOR*

*Left Index*

*LGBT Life with Full Text*

*MLA [Modern Language Association] Directory of Periodicals*

*MLA International Bibliography*

*Music Index*

*PCI: Periodicals Index Online*

*RILM Abstracts of Music Literature*

*The Serials Directory*

*Social Sciences Citation Index*

*Women's Studies International*

**COPYRIGHT © 2019, APPALACHIAN STATE UNIVERSITY**

# Appalachian Journal



## A REGIONAL STUDIES REVIEW

### Volume 46 Numbers 3-4 • Spring / Summer 2019

Signs of the Times .....	156
The Poets .....	170
Aster by George Ella Lyon POETRY .....	171
Rotten Cucumbers by Fred Chappell.....	172
Swimming Hole, Audra State Park by Jim Long POETRY .....	185
What Remained by Jim Long POETRY .....	185
Documentary and Community: An Interview with Elaine McMillion Sheldon by Tom Hansell ...	186
Man in the Photo by Susan J. Mitchell POETRY.....	201
Limited Access: Appalachians and the Golden Age of Radio by Phillip J. Obermiller.....	202
Defining Rural by Amy Price Azano POETRY .....	218
Mark Powell—Writing with Dark Vision, with Hope by Conrad Ostwalt, with Mark Powell.....	220
Diminishing Returns: Epic Motifs in John Ehle’s Mountain Novels by Ethan Mannon .....	244
Hometown Boys by Jim Long POETRY.....	261
<b>Review Essay</b>	
The Art of Complexity—Anniversary Essays on Agee by Michael Henson.....	262
Poet’s Harshest Critics by Waltr Lane POETRY.....	273
<b>Reviews</b>	
Gary Boye on <i>Bill Monroe: The Life and Music of a Blue Grass Man</i> by Tom Ewing .....	274
Sunshine Liberty Brosi on <i>Braiding Sweetgrass: Indigenous Wisdom, Scientific Knowledge, and the Teachings of Plants</i> by Robin Wall Kimmerer .....	276
Micah McCrotty on <i>Every Leaf a Mirror</i> by Jim Wayne Miller .....	277
Rondalyn V. Whitney on <i>LGBTQ Fiction and Poetry from Appalachia</i> edited by Jeff Mann and Julia Watts .....	280
Theresa L. Burriss on <i>Yellow Stonefly</i> by Tim Poland.....	282
Fred Chappell on <i>The Book of Awe</i> by Susan O’Dell Underwood.....	285
Connie Jordan Green on <i>Palindrome</i> by Pauletta Hansel.....	288
Rebecca Branson Jones on <i>Linefork</i> by Vic Rawlings and Jeff Silva .....	289
Chronicle .....	292
Appalachia by The Numbers .....	298

# Limited Access: Appalachians and the Golden Age of Radio

PHILLIP J. OBERMILLER

Radio waves originating from clear channel stations on all sides of Appalachia were washing across the region by the early 1930s.<sup>1</sup> These so-called “blowtorch” stations deployed powerful 50,000-watt transmitters that reached multiple states, even to ships at sea (Podber 2007, 74). It would seem that people in Appalachia had plenty of opportunity to tune into the Grand Ole Opry, the National Barn Dance, or the Wheeling Jamboree, popular programs in the 1920s and 1930s (Craig 2001). But could they?

Along with transmitters and programming, the third requirement for audience engagement is a radio set. In addition to being a relatively expensive luxury rather than a must-have necessity in the '20s and '30s, radios in rural areas were difficult to acquire, costly to maintain, and had poor reception. For many in the mountains, especially during the Depression, both the discretionary cash to buy radio receivers and the electricity needed to power them were in short supply (Hanson 2008).

Academic studies, census data, government reports, and oral histories reveal rural Appalachians' minimal access to the radio programming that many assume they enjoyed. During the 1930s the few radio owners in Eastern Kentucky, for example, were predominantly professionals and business people living in towns. Because radio ownership in Appalachia lagged most of the nation, non-radio owners in the region developed strategies that allowed them to enjoy their favorite programs.

## The Literature

In her discussion of early broadcasting and radio audiences, historian Susan Smulyan (2008) discusses “early broadcasting’s commercial imperative to program for those with buying power—urban, white, middle-class men” (126).<sup>2</sup> This rubric would deny many Appalachians “radio citizenship,” even if they had receivers. Although she acknowledges the huge volume of fan mail received by the National Barn Dance, the audience metrics for this and similar programs are skewed by large, urban

*Phillip Obermiller is a senior visiting scholar in the School of Planning at the University of Cincinnati and a Center fellow at the University of Kentucky's Appalachian Center.*

populations and the heavy concentrations of receivers in those areas. Smulyan writes, “Historians have the same problem as early broadcasters in figuring out who was listening and why,” an insight that resounds to this day (125).

Historian John Alexander Williams (2002) identifies three technological agents of change in Appalachia: railroads, automobiles, and radios. His sweeping history of the region goes on to discuss cars and trains but remains silent on radios. Other accounts of regional history extend that silence, (Eller 1982, Eller 2008, Drake 2001) or briefly mention radio only as ancillary to mountain music (Straw and Blethen 2004). The *Encyclopedia of Appalachia*, for example, refers to radio primarily in relation to music; under entries dealing with stations airing bluegrass and country music, the availability of receivers in Appalachia is simply presumed (Abramson and Haskell 2006, 1126-1127, 1139-1140, 1726-1728).

*While some saw no need for “talking furniture,” most Appalachians were no different ... in their desire for radios.*

Other relevant entries in the *Encyclopedia* assume that early radio sets were affordable and widely available across the region (1695, 1737-1738).<sup>3</sup>

This misapprehension about the ubiquity of radio sets persists in the social science literature as well. History of science professor Katherine Pandora (1998) writes, “... radio broadcasting permitted a mass array of individuals across regional, class, ethnic, and racial lines to experience the same live event at the same time: During these years [the 1930s] it was estimated that 20,000,000 people could be found tuned in simultaneously to the same program” (7). In fact, many Appalachians, Hispanics, and African Americans were not part of that “mass array” because they did not have a radio.<sup>4</sup>

While some saw no need for “talking furniture,” most Appalachians were no different than the general population in their desire for radios (see Rayburn 2008). Radio receivers were a source of information (news, weather forecasts, crop prices, cooking suggestions, farming techniques), inspiration (sermons, lectures, concerts), and amusement (music, sports, variety shows, mysteries, dramas, comedies, adventures). Radios, similar to the telephones, movies, and phonographs that preceded them, were attractive to many because they did not require the literacy levels of books, magazines, newspapers, letters, or telegrams. Desire, however, does not necessarily imply access.

### **Radio Ownership in the 1930s**

By the early 1930s, there were some 16.5 million radio sets in operation across the U.S. and just over 40 percent of households were identified in the 1930 census as having a radio (see Figure 1 below, Rudel 2008, 307).<sup>5</sup> However, these numbers conceal significant regional differences. In seven Southern states, for example, fewer than one in ten (about 9.8 percent) households had radios.

**Figure 1. Percentage of Households with Radios, 1930**

<b>Location</b>	<b>Percent Households with Radios</b>
United States	40.3
<b>Selected Southern States</b>	
Mississippi	5.4
South Carolina	7.6
Arkansas	9.2
Alabama	9.5
Georgia	9.9
Louisiana	11.2
Florida	15.5
<b>Selected States with Appalachian Counties</b>	
North Carolina	11.2
Tennessee	14.3
Virginia	18.2
Kentucky	18.3
West Virginia	23.3

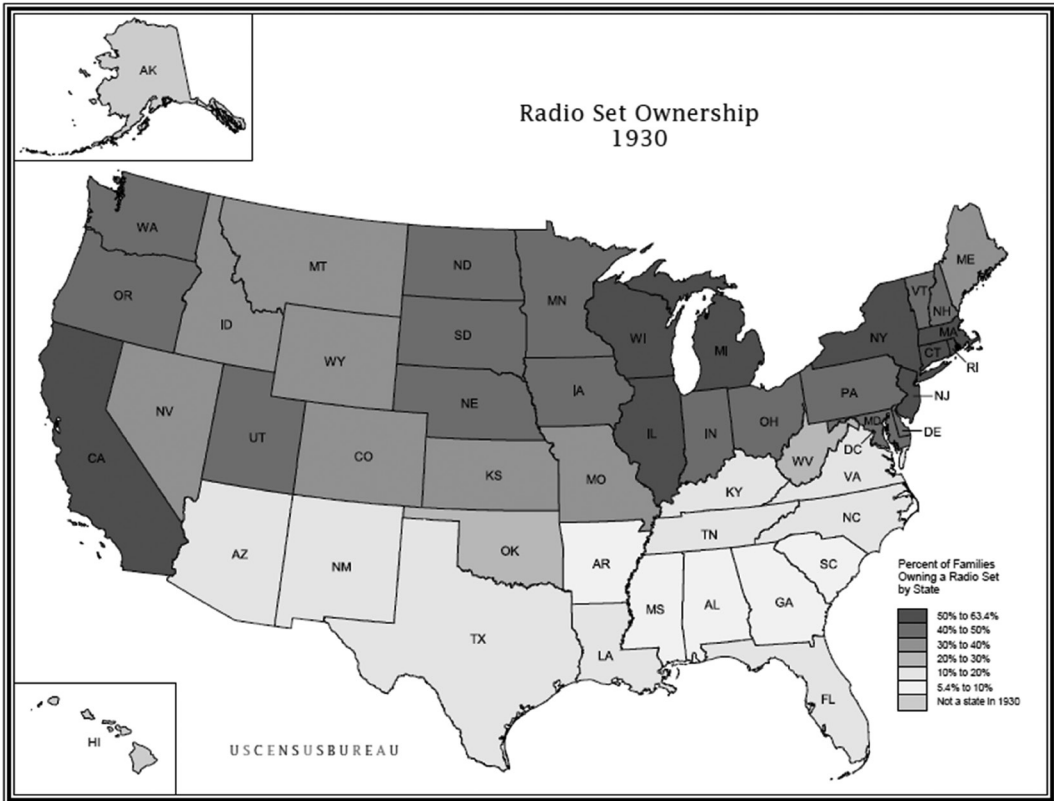
Source: U.S. Department of Commerce (1932), Census Bureau, "Radio Sets, Parts and Accessories"

Five states that would eventually have federally designated Appalachian counties are also shown in Figure 1. With the exception of West Virginia, these states have both Appalachian and non-Appalachian counties; however, they give some sense of the scarcity of radios within their boundaries. Even though these statistics include urbanized areas and non-Appalachian counties, fewer than two in ten families in the five states (about 17 percent) had radios in 1930.<sup>6</sup>

Figure 2 shows that the same five states (NC, TN, VA, KY, WV) generally had fewer radio sets than those in the Northeast, the Midwest, or the West; were on a par with those in the Southwest; and, excepting Florida and Louisiana, had more households with radios than states in the Deep South (Cantril and Allport 1935, 85-86).<sup>7</sup>

There were both economic and social reasons for these disparities. In addition to the costs involved in owning a radio, the predominantly urban white programming available during the 1920s and 1930s was not a great incentive for rural Southern African Americans to spend what little cash they had on a radio. The popular Amos 'n Andy program, for example, was set in Manhattan's Harlem, was voiced by two white radio actors, and drew criticism from African American churches and newspapers for the stereotypes it promoted (McLeod 2005, Tabler 2015). Moreover, blues and jazz were not widely offered by broadcasters, who were seeking a middle-class white audience on behalf of their advertisers (Smulyan 2008).<sup>8</sup>

**Figure 2. Distribution of Radio Sets by State, 1930**



Source: U.S. Department of Commerce (n.d.), Census Bureau, “Radio Set Ownership 1930”

The Southwest had a large Spanish-speaking population that was also underserved by U.S. broadcasters and therefore not inclined to own radios. The few Spanish-language programs were allocated to “off-hour” time slots, usually between midnight and six in the morning. Hispanics faced the same financial exigencies as African Americans and Appalachians during the Depression; few could afford to buy and maintain receivers, much less the resources to develop their own Spanish-language programs (Albarran and Hutton 2009). During the 1930s, those in states with large numbers of Appalachians and Hispanics owned fewer radios than those in states with predominantly white populations (Northeast, Midwest, West), but radio ownership rates in Appalachia and the Southwest were greater than in Southern states with large African American populations.<sup>9</sup>

## Problems Affecting Radio Ownership

### *Electricity*

Although the Tennessee Valley Authority Act was approved by Congress in 1933 and the Rural Electrification Act was passed three years later, it took much longer for electric service to reach most Appalachian households. In 1935, for example, electric utilities provided power to fewer than five percent of the rural households in West Virginia, Kentucky, Tennessee, North Carolina, and South Carolina (Nye 1990).

Using Kentucky as an example, a steady source of electricity came to its cities first (Lexington and Louisville had electric utilities dating from the early 1900s) and much later to rural areas of the Commonwealth. Mining companies generated their own electricity for use in coal production and for lighting in company-owned housing, but did not extend this service into adjacent areas.

Early radios in areas with no electric service were either crystal sets requiring no power, or electric tube sets requiring batteries. Crystal receivers were inexpensive, but weak, hard to tune, required an antenna, and could

only be heard through headphones. Battery-powered sets with vacuum tubes also needed antennas, but were easier to tune and allowed for communal listening around a speaker. Data collected on early radio ownership did not distinguish between crystal- and tube-based receivers, but given the difficulty of obtaining a signal in rural and mountainous areas,

*Those dependent on battery-operated radios usually conserved power by listening perhaps once or at most a few times a week ...*

it is likely that the more powerful tube sets were preferred in Appalachia.

Those dependent on battery-operated radios usually conserved power by listening perhaps once or at most a few times a week, especially on Saturday nights, while urban households served by electric utilities could listen to their radios throughout the day (Podber 2007, 73). The Sears, Roebuck and Co. Catalog (1914) offered rural buyers a “Private Electric Lighting Plant” and throughout the 1930s Zenith offered windmill-driven generators, but these devices made the cost of radio ownership even more prohibitive (746, Litwinovich 2015). Consequently, even owning a radio in the mountains did not provide full access to programming.

**Availability and Affordability**

Retail stores selling radios were scarce and, except for coal company stores, usually located in cities far from rural buyers. According to the U.S. Department of Commerce (1932), the net sales for radio wholesalers who supplied retailers in Kentucky, for example, amounted to less than .4 percent of radio sales nationwide.

Battery-powered radios could be bought through mail-order houses such as Sears, Roebuck and Co. and Montgomery Ward. Although average prices dropped during the 1930s from \$136 to \$35 and installment plans were available, such a purchase represented a sizable portion of the Depression-era annual income of a coal miner (about \$962) or farmworker (about \$500), assuming they had work (Craig 2006, U.S. Department of Labor 1941). Ethnomusicologist Bradley Hanson (2008) observes that owning a radio was an expensive proposition: “In Appalachia and the Deep South, income never kept pace with the national average. For farmers and miners throughout the Southern mountains, the cost of radio was not easily absorbed.”



Not only were radios themselves relatively costly, maintaining batteries and tubes could be beyond the means of families with little ready cash (Douglas 1987, 49, see also Craig 2004b). Some batteries could be recharged, which required access to electric current, while others could not be recharged and had to be replaced. Moreover, replacing vacuum tubes was an ongoing expense. As radio historian Steve Craig (2009) points out, “Early electronic tubes were fragile, expensive, and frequent replacements were required” (78, see also Podber 2007, 30).

### **Reception**

Mountainous environments often required more expensive radios to obtain minimally acceptable reception, but even those households able to afford premium receivers were not guaranteed static-free reception. According to Craig (2006),

While some rural homes were close enough to population centers to receive strong signals, many were not, and the unpredictable propagation of AM radio waves in the standard broadcast band meant reception in more remote areas was often unreliable ... as late as 1946 over a third of rural listeners still reported having reception difficulties. (4-5)

A report compiled by extension agents under the aegis of the U.S. Department of Agriculture (1927) summarizes the problems affecting rural radio ownership:

The first problem is the actual purchase of the set ... it is a difficult matter to secure the money for the initial investment. The second problem is the cost of operation and maintenance of the set. The third problem is the difficulty of tuning in the programs desired, due to static, interference, heterodyning [mixed frequencies], and allied hindrances to perfect radio reception.

These problems undoubtedly affected rates of radio ownership in Appalachia as well.

### **A Kentucky Case Study**

In this essay, Eastern Kentucky is a proxy for the rural counties that later became part of the federally designated Appalachian Region. Figure 3 indicates that by the end of the 1920s there were at least a dozen clear channel stations sending powerful signals into Eastern Kentucky from all points of the compass, along with many smaller stations located in and near the region (Nash 1995).

In 1920, the country’s first licensed radio station, KDKA, began broadcasting from Pittsburgh in what would later become known as Northern Appalachia (Rudel 2008, 33). By May 1931, there were over 600 licensed radio stations in the U.S., many of them local and regional broadcasters which were on the air for a limited part of each day (267). These smaller “teapot” stations had to stop broadcasting at night, when many rural people had time to tune in, in order to open the airwaves for the clear channel stations (Barfield 1996). As a result, local broadcasts did little to serve listeners in Eastern Kentucky, even as poor reception made it difficult to receive the more powerful national signals.

**Figure 3. Selected Clear Channel Stations, 1920-1929**

Call	Location	Date Founded
KDKA	Pittsburgh	1920
WSB	Atlanta	1922
WBT	Charlotte	1922*
WJR	Detroit	1922
WHAS	Louisville	1922
WLS	Chicago	1924*
WLW	Cincinnati	1925
WSM	Nashville	1925
WGN	Chicago	1926*
WLAC	Nashville	1926
WWVA	Wheeling	1926
WCKY	Cincinnati	1929

\*These stations developed from smaller precursors

In addition to transmitters and receivers, programming is a necessary component of radio broadcasting. Entertainment had the biggest share of listeners nationally, with country music programs appealing to rural people in particular. By 1924 the National Barn Dance was on WLS in Chicago; a year later Nashville’s WSM copied the Barn Dance format to create the Grand Ole Opry. WWVA began broadcasting the Wheeling Jamboree in 1933, and WLW in Cincinnati aired the Renfro Valley Barn Dance starting in 1937 (Berry 2008, McGee 2016).

Clearly, Appalachian Kentucky did not want for powerful signals or popular programming during radio’s golden age. This invites the question: Did Eastern Kentuckians have radios to receive this programming?

**Radio Ownership Patterns in Kentucky**

In Figure 4, seven Eastern Kentucky counties, seven Western Kentucky counties, and three urban Kentucky counties were randomly selected. Within each county, a township and an enumeration district within that township were also randomly selected.<sup>10</sup> For each enumeration district selected, the 1930 manuscript census provides the data for the columns labeled “Households,” “Radio Sets,” and “Population of ED.”

The data show that 82 (7 percent) of the 1,161 the Eastern Kentucky households surveyed had a radio. The 1930 census data also provide a social profile of the radio owners. The heads of radio-owning households tended to be homeowners rather than renters, and townspeople rather than rural folk. Radio owners’ occupations are illustrative of their incomes and social status: doctors, attorneys, dentists, pharmacists, ministers, and bankers, as well as proprietors of auto repair shops, funeral homes, movie theaters, newspapers, restaurants, boarding houses, and general merchandise stores. Several “railroad operators” were listed, along with upper-level miners

**Figure 4. Radio Sets by Household and Total Population for Samples of Kentucky Counties, 1930**

<b>Eastern KY Rural Counties</b>	<b>Township</b>	<b>Enumeration District (ED)</b>	<b>Households (HH)</b>	<b>Radio Sets</b>	<b>Population of ED</b>
Breathitt	Big Rock	3	551	3	1,750
Harlan	Lynch	21	138	24	1,013
Letcher	Blackey	16	85	19	363
McCreary	“District 1”	1	88	1	68
Owsley	Boonville	1	57	7	253
Perry	Hazard	5	173	20	861
Wolfe	Campton	8	69	8	337
			Total HH 1161	Total Radios 82	Total Pop. 4,645
<b>Western KY Rural Counties</b>					
Breckenridge	Hardinsburg	4	218	61	949
Butler	“District 3”	8	232	15	1,133
Caldwell	Freedonia	10	130	32	517
Grayson	Rock Creek	15	340	2	1,547
Hopkins	Kitchen	29	570	36	2,010
Muhlenberg	Greenville	19	245	95	1,015
Ohio	Hartford	3	76	7	332
			Total HH 1811	Total Radios 248	Total Pop. 7,503
<b>Central KY Urban Counties</b>					
Fayette	Lexington	21	531	208	2,416
Franklin	Bridgeport	16	318	58	1,521
Jefferson	Louisville	89	572	274	2,187
			Total HH 1421	Total Radios 540	Total Pop. 6124

Source: Custom Tabulations from the 1930 U.S. Federal Census Population Schedules, National Archives and Records Administration, microfilm publication T626

(foreman, motorman, brakeman); in the data set, only a single farmer and a seamstress showed up as radio owners.<sup>11</sup>

This opens the question of whether low rates of radio ownership were particular to Eastern Kentucky or simply a characteristic of rural populations in general. Comparative data from seven rural Western Kentucky counties, chosen through the same random selection method, are presented in the second section of Figure 4. The data show that 248 (14 percent) of the 1,811

households surveyed had a radio, an ownership rate twice that of Eastern Kentucky. The seven Western Kentucky counties' data, however, showed radio sets fairly evenly distributed among professionals and business people living in towns as well as "general farmers" living in rural parts of the counties.

Figure 4 also shows the central Kentucky urban counties encompassing the cities of Lexington (Fayette), Frankfort (Franklin), and Louisville (Jefferson). Sample data from these highly urbanized counties indicate 540 (38 percent) of 1,421 households had a radio in 1930, not far from the national norm.<sup>12</sup> With

*Despite powerful transmitters and popular programming, few people in ... the Appalachian portion of the state had radio receivers....*

radios in nearly two out of five households, urban counties in Kentucky had nearly three times as many radio owners as its rural western counties and over five times as many as its coalfield counties.

At the dawn of the radio age, radio ownership in Kentucky was clearly an urban and upper-class phenomenon. Despite powerful transmitters and popular programming, few people in what is now known as the Appalachian portion

of the state had radio receivers, battery operated or otherwise, and half as many as their rural counterparts in the western part of the state.

**Alternative Access**

Having a radio and having access to radio programming are two different things.<sup>13</sup> This section examines some of the ways Appalachians gained access to radio broadcasts if they did not own a receiver.

**Informal Gatherings**

Communal listening often occurred in areas where radio sets were as scarce as utility-generated electricity. Battery-powered radios would be placed on front porches or simply under trees where friends, neighbors, and family could gather. Food and drink were often shared, making listening to the radio a social occasion. Listeners also came together in parlors, churches, schools, or stores to hear their favorite broadcasts (Podber 2007).<sup>14</sup> In his history of radio in the Bluegrass State, Francis Nash (1995) notes, "In rural Kentucky, receivers were scarce, and common practice was to gather at the local store, or at the house of a neighbor fortunate enough to own a radio set, and listen to the nightly programs" (25).

In the mountains, a truck or tractor battery might be used to power a receiver, but the vehicle had to be parked on a downhill slant so it could be roll-started and the battery recharged in case it was drained by the radio. Other methods for replenishing batteries included removing the electric generator from a vehicle and hooking it up to a windmill or to a gasoline-powered washing machine (Nash 1995, 25).



Informal gathering. Photo courtesy of J.R. Chandler IV with permission from Fork Shoals Historical Society

### **Speakerlines**

Hardwired networks called “speakerlines” or “grapevine” radio systems were established across several Appalachian counties in northwestern South Carolina during the 1930s (Opt 1992). With a receiver and amplifier located at the edge of an electrical grid, often in a general store, entrepreneurs enlisted subscribers without electricity, running a radio wire to their homes, sometimes using Coke bottles as insulators and fence posts or trees for support. In addition to charging a modest monthly subscription fee, the stores also sold the speakers needed to complete the system. A radio at the base station provided programming requested by subscribers (usually country music), from 6 am to 10 pm daily but often later on Saturday nights. When broadcasts to the base receiver were overwhelmed by static, local programming was substituted in the form of phonograph records, live musicians, singers, preachers, and local “news” reports based on gossip collected at the general stores (Oatis 1980).

As copper lines replaced older iron wires later in the decade, these networks grew to serve hundreds of customers each with lines running for many miles (Rogers 1980). One operator gives a sense of the extent of a single-wired radio network among the dozen or so operating in northwestern South Carolina: “In about four years, 600 homes were being served. This required 400 miles of single-wire transmission lines extending over three counties, with the most distant customer 24 miles from my receiver” (69).

As the Depression eased and rural electrification was introduced in the area, these one-channel, hard-wired radio systems gradually gave way to individual receivers that could provide a selection of programs. By the advent of World War II, most of the speakerline systems had gone quiet (Opt 1992).

### **Listening Centers**

A top-down educational strategy was implemented in 1933 when Louisville station WHAS allied with the University of Kentucky (UK) to ameliorate the perceived “backwardness” of both mountaineers and flatland farmers in the western part of the state. Frances Jewell McVey (1934), a UK faculty member, described the project as bringing “enlightenment and stimulation” to “backwoods Kentucky” (see also “Listening” 1937). According to the *Louisville Courier-Journal*, radios were seen as “instrument[s] to carry the light into untold corners of darkness” (quoted in Benn 2017, 6).

Knowing that few in the target audience had receivers, the project established listening centers by providing battery-powered radios to schools, town halls, and general stores. In these centers, local audiences under the supervision of hand-picked center directors were to be “uplifted” by listening to UK faculty lectures and the “right kind” of classical music in addition to popular ballads sung on air by John Jacob Niles (Nash 1995, 51).

The center directors were instructed by UK officials to “acquaint themselves with the more worthwhile programs” lest local audiences opt for more popular programming (Nash 1995, 50). University administrators deemed this type of enforcement necessary because educational programming could not withstand the lure of pure entertainment. In 1940 WHAS, for instance, dropped a UK program, Capsule of Knowledge, when it was discovered that “the station’s audience rating dropped from 80 percent to an 8 percent share when the program came on” (46). Begun in 1933 with 20 listening centers, the project ended in 1948 with 84 centers; by then most listeners had acquired their own radios (Benn 2017, Hall 2007, 64-65).

### **Factors Affecting Radio Ownership in the 1940s and 1950s**

By 1940 summary census figures show an overall growth in radio ownership across Kentucky (manuscript census data for comparison with the 1930 sample are unavailable).<sup>15</sup> Nonetheless, disparities remained between home owners (69 percent) and renters (62 percent), as well as by location: 84 percent of urban dwellings had radios in 1940 in contrast to radio ownership in rural non-farm dwellings (66 percent) and rural farm dwellings (49 percent). It would seem reasonable to infer that somewhere between a third and a half of Eastern Kentucky’s dwellings still had no radios. At the time, the Commonwealth’s cities were comparable to national norms in terms of radio ownership; in Covington, for example, 92 percent of dwellings had one or more radios while 88 percent in Louisville had one or more.<sup>16</sup>

Appalachians who migrated to cities during World War II to work in the war industries could not use their paychecks to buy new radios: retail sales of radios and spare parts were halted when components for receivers were diverted to the war effort. With regular salaries, plentiful electric power, and lots of country music programs on the air, many Appalachian migrants either had to search for scarce secondhand radios or join their urban neighbors in communal public gatherings listening to sports, music, and the “top priority” of the day: news of the war (Sterling and Kittross 2002).

Because rural electrification had not reached all corners of Appalachia even as late as the 1950s, battery radios were still the norm in some areas. According to a U.S. Department of Commerce (1953) report,

Over the past two decades, radios in the home have become more common until, by 1950, almost every home had one or more radios. The [national] proportions increased rapidly—from 40 percent in 1930 to 83 percent in 1940, and to 96 percent in 1950.

As with electric lighting and refrigeration, the increases were most pronounced for farm housing, paralleling to some extent the introduction of electricity into more rural areas. However, in 1950, there were a substantial number of farm homes with a radio but no electric lighting. (xxxiv)

This observation by the census bureau indicates that by 1950 discrepancies between urban and rural radio ownership had virtually disappeared. Battery-operated radios were still necessary in some areas, however, including Appalachian Kentucky. Breathitt County native Mike Maloney recalls that in the late 1940s,

We lived so far away from other people, at times you couldn’t even see the smoke from other chimneys, but we had a battery-powered radio. I remember how hard it was to carry that battery up to the mountaintop ... I could listen to classical music or to WLW in Cincinnati, the Grand Ole Opry on WSU [WSM], or whatever. (Wagner, Obermiller, and Wagner 2013, 179)

The manuscript data for the 1950 census will not be released until 2022, preventing a comparative analysis, but if past trends prevailed, Appalachian radio ownership increased apace, remaining ahead of the South while lagging behind most other U.S. regions.

As car radios became prevalent and Appalachian households were incorporated into radio-friendly electrical grids after World War II, local stations airing bluegrass and country music sprang up around the region. WLAF in LaFollette, Tennessee, for example, was home of the Tennessee Jamboree (Hanson 2008). KDKA’s regular Sunday evening broadcast of Pittsburgh’s Calvary Episcopal Church’s choir initiated a tradition of religious broadcasting that was taken up by numerous local stations in post-war Appalachia (see Dorgan 1993).<sup>17</sup> Today, campus-based stations such as WEHC in Southwestern Virginia, and

*As car radios became prevalent ... after World War II, local stations airing bluegrass and country music sprang up around the region.*

independent stations such as WMMT in Eastern Kentucky keep local radio alive in the region.

### Conclusion

Despite being surrounded by powerful clear channel stations broadcasting popular programs, relatively few residents of the region we now know as Appalachia had access to radio programming during the golden age of radio. This was because they did not have electricity, or could not afford a battery-powered radio, or lacked decent reception even when they could afford one. Appalachian people nonetheless did the best they could to gain access to their favorite programs by coming together in group settings to share a radio, or by innovative technological means such as speakerline systems. Nevertheless, the Grand Ole Opry, various radio jamborees, and barn dance broadcasts were enjoyed primarily by audiences in cities and towns and on Midwestern farms. Ironically, the broadcast music that originated in the mountains could not be heard by many people living in the mountains.

### Notes

The author appreciates the assistance and encouragement provided for this article by Fred Bartenstein who teaches country and bluegrass music history at the University of Dayton; Carson Benn, doctoral candidate in history at the University of Kentucky; retired University of North Texas radio historian Steve Craig; Susan Opt, professor of communication studies at James Madison University; and Stuart Smolkin of the Southern Appalachian Radio Museum; and research assistant Allison Brown.

1. Although Appalachia did not become a federally recognized region until 1965, the counties it encompasses today will be referred to as such throughout this essay. For the current federal definition see [https://www.arc.gov/appalachian\\_region/TheAppalachianRegion.asp](https://www.arc.gov/appalachian_region/TheAppalachianRegion.asp).

2. Although the Radio Act of 1927 was meant to bring order to the “chaos” of early broadcasting, it marked the beginning of corporate dominance of the airwaves through commercial networks such as NBC and CBS.

3. There is an *Encyclopedia of Appalachia* entry on “religious broadcasting,” but it refers to post-World War II programs that filled the airwaves after home and car radios had become ubiquitous across the nation and the region (see Abramson and Haskell, pp. 1739-1740, and Dorgan 1993).

4. The comparative geographic analysis used here, based on U.S. Census data categories, complements the internal social analysis that recognizes the region’s diversity.

5. The 1930 census had a category for “Home Data” including an indication of whether the household had a radio set; a decade later the census coverage of occupied dwellings had a similar question: “Radio in dwelling unit?” In 1950 the question was dichotomized into “with radio” and “no radio,” and categorized for urban, rural nonfarm, and rural farm dwellings.

6. The United States Department of Agriculture’s (1927) Radio Service indicated that only 7.6 percent of farms located in the same five states had radios in 1927.

7. Cantril and Allport were among the first to summarize research on radio set ownership by region, income, and location on an urban-to-rural continuum.



8. Wilson (1937) found active opposition to jazz programming and a preference for “hillbilly ditties and cowboy songs” among Midwestern farmers (10).
9. The equivalency between Appalachian and Hispanic rates of radio ownership is more likely to have an economic rather than a linguistic basis. Many Spanish-speaking people in the Southwest could tune in to stations broadcasting from Mexico, provided they could afford a receiver.
10. In those cases where random selection produced an Enumeration District (ED) with an institution such as a prison, hospital, orphanage, retirement home, or boarding school (including colleges and universities), another ED was randomly selected.
11. The income and social status of Eastern Kentucky radio owners are in keeping with national patterns of radio ownership (see Craig 2004a, Bellville 1939).
12. The same randomized method used in the rural counties was used to select the urban enumeration districts.
13. Cantril and Allport (1935) distinguish “between owners and users of radio sets” (87).
14. Podber (2007) and Barfield (1996) provide valuable information about listeners, but this can be misleading—oral histories by their nature tend to focus on those who had access to radios.
15. Only the population schedules are available from 1940. Housing and agriculture manuscript data were destroyed after they were compiled, and therefore not preserved for eventual public release. See [https://www.census.gov/history/www/genealogy/decennial\\_census\\_records/census\\_records\\_2.html](https://www.census.gov/history/www/genealogy/decennial_census_records/census_records_2.html).
16. The census terminology changed from “households” in 1930 to “occupied dwellings” in 1940 (U.S. Department of Commerce 1943, 233).
17. In a recent bit of historical irony, the long-running program Music From the Hills of Home, hosted by bluegrass musician Katie Laur (2017) on WNKU in Northern Kentucky, was canceled by a Christian broadcasting network after it purchased the station.

## Works Cited

- Abramson, Rudy, and Jean Haskell, eds. 2006. *Encyclopedia of Appalachia*. Knoxville: Univ. of Tennessee Press.
- Albarran, Alan B., and Brian Hutton. 2009. “A History of Spanish Language Radio in the United States.” [http://www.arbitron.com/downloads/mcl\\_unt\\_history\\_spanish\\_radio.pdf](http://www.arbitron.com/downloads/mcl_unt_history_spanish_radio.pdf).
- Barfield, Ray. 1996. *Listening to Radio, 1920-1950*. Westport, CT: Praeger.
- Bellville, Hugh M., Jr. 1939. *Social Stratification of the Radio Audience*. New York: National Broadcasting Company.
- Benn, Carson. 2017. “Radio ‘Salutes’ the East: Newspaper and University Interests in the Listening Stations of Eastern Kentucky.” Paper presented at the Appalachian Studies Association Conference, Blacksburg, VA.
- Berry, Chad, ed. 2008. *The Hayloft Gang: The Story of the National Barn Dance*. Urbana: Univ. of Illinois Press.
- Cantril, Hadley, and Gordon W. Allport. 1935. *The Psychology of Radio*. New York: Harper & Brothers.
- Craig, Steve. 2001. “‘The Farmer’s Friend’: Radio Comes to Rural America, 1920-1927.” *Journal of Radio Studies* 8, no. 2: 330-46.
- Craig, Steve. 2004a. “How America Adopted Radio: Demographic Differences in Set Ownership Reported in the 1930-1950 U.S. Censuses.” *Journal of Broadcasting & Electronic Media* 48, no. 2: 179-95.

- Craig, Steve. 2004b. "Mail Order Radios: Receiver Evolution in the Pages of the Sears, Roebuck and Montgomery Ward Catalogs, 1920-1950." Paper presented at Popular Culture Association Convention, San Antonio, TX.
- Craig, Steve. 2006. "'The More They Listen, the More They Buy': Radio and the Modernizing of Rural America, 1930-1939." *Agricultural History* 80, no. 1: 1-16.
- Craig, Steve. 2009. *Out of the Dark: A History of Radio and Rural America*. Tuscaloosa: Univ. of Alabama Press.
- Dorgan, Howard. 1993. *The Airwaves of Zion: Radio and Religion in Appalachia*. Knoxville: Univ. of Tennessee Press.
- Douglas, George H. 1987. *The Early Days of Radio Broadcasting*. Jefferson, NC: McFarland.
- Drake, Richard B. 2001. *A History of Appalachia*. Lexington: Univ. Press of Kentucky.
- Eller, Ronald D. 1982. *Miners, Millhands, and Mountaineers: Industrialization of the Appalachian South, 1880-1930*. Knoxville: Univ. of Tennessee Press.
- Eller, Ronald D. 2008. *Uneven Ground: Appalachia Since 1945*. Lexington: Univ. Press of Kentucky.
- Hall, Randal L. 2007. *Lum and Abner: Rural America and the Golden Age of Radio*. Lexington: Univ. Press of Kentucky.
- Hanson, Bradley. 2008. "The Tennessee Jamboree: Local Radio, the Barn Dance, and Cultural Life in Appalachian East Tennessee." *Southern Spaces*. <https://southernspaces.org/2008/tennessee-jamboree-local-radio-barn-dance-and-cultural-life-appalachian-east-tennessee>.
- Laur, Katie. 2017. "Radio Days." *Cincinnati Magazine* 50, no. 9: 44-49.
- "Listening Center: Radio Reaches Kentucky Mountaineers." 1937. *Newsweek* 9, Feb. 6: 23.
- Litwinovich, Paul. 2015. "The Farm Radio." <https://www.wshu.org/post/farm-radio>
- McGee, Nathan. 2016. "Sounds Like Home: Bluegrass Music and Appalachian Migration in American Cities, 1945-1980." PhD diss., Univ. of Cincinnati.
- McLeod, Elizabeth. 2005. *The Original Amos 'n' Andy: Freeman Gosden, Charles Correll and the 1928-1943 Radio Serial*. Jefferson, NC: McFarland.
- McVey, Frances Jewell. 1934. "Backwoods Kentucky Listens In." *Forum and Century* 92, July: 51-53.
- Nash, Francis M. 1995. *Towers Over Kentucky: A History of Radio and TV in the Bluegrass State*. Lexington, KY: Host Communications.
- Nye, David E. 1990. *Electrifying America: Social Meanings of a New Technology, 1880-1940*. Cambridge, MA: MIT Press.
- Oatis, Jonathan W. 1980. "'The Grapevine': A Radio Started Career in Politics." *Greenwood (SC) Index-Journal*, Aug. 11.
- Opt, Susan K. 1992. "The Development of Rural Wired Radio Systems in Upstate South Carolina." *Journal of Radio Studies* 1: 71-81.
- Pandora, Katherine. 1998. "'Mapping the New Mental World Created by Radio': Media Messages, Cultural Politics, and Cantril and Allport's *The Psychology of Radio*." *Journal of Social Issues* 54, no. 1: 7-27.
- Podber, Jacob J. 2007. *The Electronic Front Porch: An Oral History of the Arrival of Modern Media in Rural Appalachia and the Melungeon Community*. Macon, GA: Mercer Univ. Press.
- Rayburn, John. 2008. *Cat Whiskers and Talking Furniture: A Memoir of Radio and Television Broadcasting*. Jefferson, NC: McFarland.
- Rogers, Gordon F. 1980. "Bringing Radio to the Rural Home." *RCA Engineer* 26, no. 1: 69-73.
- Rudel, Anthony. 2008. *Hello, Everybody! The Dawn of American Radio*. Orlando, FL: Houghton Mifflin Harcourt Publishing Co.
- Sears, Roebuck and Co. Catalog. 1914. "Make Your Own Electric Light."

- Smulyan, Susan. 2008. "Early Broadcasting and Radio Audiences." In *The Hayloft Gang: The Story of the National Barn Dance*, edited by Chad Berry, 119-29. Urbana: Univ. of Illinois Press.
- Sterling, Christopher H., and John Michael Kittross. 2002. *Stay Tuned: A History of American Broadcasting*. 3rd ed. Mahwah, NJ: Lawrence Earlbaum Associates.
- Straw, Richard A., and H. Tyler Blethen, eds. 2004. *High Mountains Rising: Appalachia in Time and Place*. Urbana: Univ. of Illinois Press.
- Tabler, Dave. 2015. "Radio and the Blue Ridge." <http://www.appalachianhistory.net/2015/03/radio-and-the-blue-ridge.html>
- U.S. Department of Agriculture. 1927. "Report of Number and Uses of Radio Sets on Farms in the United States." Washington, DC: Radio Service.
- U.S. Department of Commerce. n.d. "Radio Set Ownership 1930." <https://www2.census.gov/geo/pdfs/maps-data/maps/thematic/housing/radios.pdf>.
- U.S. Department of Commerce, Bureau of the Census. 1932. "Wholesale Distribution: Radio Sets, Parts and Accessories." *15th Census of the United States*, Distribution No. W-202. Washington, DC: U.S. Government Printing Office.
- U.S. Department of Commerce, Bureau of the Census. 1943. "Housing Volume II: General Characteristics." *16th Census of the United States*, Part 3. Washington, DC: U.S. Government Printing Office.
- U.S. Department of Commerce, Bureau of the Census. 1953. "Census of Housing: Volume I General Characteristics." *17th Census of the United States*, Part 1. Washington, DC: U.S. Government Printing Office.
- U.S. Department of Labor, Bureau of Labor Statistics. 1941. "Handbook of Labor Statistics: Volume II Wages and Wage Regulation." Bulletin 694. Washington, DC: U.S. Government Printing Office. <https://babel.hathitrust.org/cgi/pt?id=uiug.30112018120003;view=1up;seq=1>.
- Wagner, Thomas E., Phillip J. Obermiller, and Melinda B. Wagner. 2013. "Fifty Years of Appalachian Advocacy: An Interview with Mike Maloney." *Appalachian Journal* 40, no. 3-4: 174-218.
- Williams, John Alexander. 2002. *Appalachia: A History*. Chapel Hill: Univ. of North Carolina Press.
- Wilson, Charles M. 1937. *Money at the Crossroads: An Intimate Study of Radio's Influence Upon a Great Market of 60,000,000 People*. New York: National Broadcasting Company.