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Derek Vaillant, "'Your Voice Came In Last Night...But I Thought It Sounded a Little Scared': Rural Radio Listening and 'Talking Back' during the Progressive Era in Wisconsin, 1920–1932" in Michele Hilmes and Jason Loviglio, eds. *Radio Reader*. NY: Routledge, 2002, pp. 63–88.

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CHAPTER 4

**"YOUR VOICE CAME IN LAST NIGHT . . . BUT
I THOUGHT IT SOUNDED A LITTLE SCARED"**

**Rural Radio Listening and "Talking Back" during
the Progressive Era in Wisconsin, 1920–1932**

Derek Vaillant

ON 21 FEBRUARY 1925 EARL M. TERRY, broadcast chief of state-operated WHA radio in Madison, Wisconsin, and an associate professor of physics at the University of Wisconsin, received a disquieting letter from a male farmer and listener. "Dear Sir," the letter from C. H. Alsmeyer began,

I have for a long time been whanting [sic] to take my pickaxe and go after someone but did not know who but seen your talk in the *Capitol Times* and so think that you may be one of the guilty ones.¹

Terry had recently criticized rural WHA listeners in the local press for their tepid response to uplifting classical music broadcasts. Alsmeyer wrote to disabuse Terry of any notion that rural listeners were quiescent or disinterested in steering the operations of their state-sponsored radio station. "Give us something with a melody and you will git [sic] the applause," he explained:

"Carry me Back to Old Verginia," [sic] "Just as the Sun Went Down," "Hot Time," or "My Best Girl"—something with a tune—a melody—git someone with a fiddle another with an old banjo. I said fiddle don't mean a VIOLIN. . . . If you will do something like that you will git the applause [sic] cards and we the tax payers will vote you the biggest station in the U.S.A.

Alsmeyer's fondness for songs, such as "Carry Me Back to Old Virginia," reflected a preference among working- and middle-class whites for a nostalgic brand of

postbellum blackface song linked to America's transformation from a predominately rural to a predominately urban nation in the late nineteenth century. Alsmeyer's fantasy of routing the donnish men in bow ties sitting behind the microphones at the WHA studios broadcasting uplifting classical music, and replacing them with a brace of fiddle and banjo players, reflected deep-seated social tensions dividing male farmers from their urban professional counterparts.

"One of the controlling myths of the 1920s," notes historian Paul Glad, "was a fear amongst rural Wisconsinites that they were destined to lose out to urban industrial prosperity and that country life as they had known it was on the wane." Alienation from the modern metropolis transformed by industrialization and immigration and fear of being outmoded in the modern world of technology-dependent agricultural production worried rural Americans, particularly male farmers such as Alsmeyer, and exacerbated tensions between them and their perceived adversaries in cities (Danbom; Higham; Swierenga; Wiebe). During the 1920s in Wisconsin these issues shifted to the airwaves, as rural radio listeners and urban radio producers struggled to define the character of public broadcasting.

Stung by Alsmeyer's rebuke, Terry produced a less-than-neighborly reply defending the use of classical music on WHA and the broader implications of this program choice. "Having been brought up on a farm myself," he wrote,

I think I know pretty well the character of programs you would most enjoy. In as much as this is a state station we must be very particular with regard to the character of the material broadcast, and it is our policy to send out nothing which does not have a high degree of merit. . . . The air is overcrowded every night with jazz and other worthless material, and it would be quite beneath the dignity of the University to add to it.

Terry closed with the unrepentant declaration that as long as he was in charge of programming, "old time fiddler" music would *never* be heard on the WHA airwaves.²

The pugnacious exchange between Alsmeyer and Terry reflected a sharp divide between certain rural listeners and state radio programmers. Alsmeyer expected his state radio station to validate his values and identity as a male farmer steeped in a specific set of social and cultural traditions. He demanded radio service accountable to the rural masses as he imagined them rather than to the elite disciples of cultural uplift and agricultural modernization. Old-style "coon" and fiddler songs personified all that Alsmeyer found pleasurable and authentic in an era when urbanization pulled men and women off the farm and cultural uplift threatened to invalidate the lifestyles and values of those who remained behind.

Terry, by contrast, represented the new urban breed—a modern hybrid of farmer and scientist. Growing up, he undoubtedly knew men like Alsmeyer. But he had quit the farm for the city, exchanged overalls for a suit and tie, replaced folk wisdom with hard science, and committed himself to furthering progressive reform and rural transformation via radio. He believed that the mission of WHA was not to indulge rural popular culture, but to reinvent it. WHA must function as a progressive instrument of the state, steering listeners away from "worthless material," such as "coon" or jazz music, and redirecting rural sensibilities toward cosmopolitan ideals with a "high degree of merit." With its vernacular lyrics, simple arrangements, and celebration of a mythic past, Alsmeyer's music smacked of antimodern culture, which is exactly what Terry, and progressive extension radio generally, sought to expunge from the rural landscape.

Broadcasting at WHA began at a time when the pace of the social and cultural transformation of America from a rural society to a predominately urban one was at its most rapid. Over several generations, rural inhabitants had abandoned farming and village life in greater and greater numbers for brighter prospects in the city. By 1920 the U.S. census reported that for the first time a greater percentage of Americans resided in urban areas than in rural settings.³ Stiff challenges faced those who stayed behind in the countryside to farm. After briefly reaching unprecedented heights during World War I, farm prices collapsed and proceeded to drift sideways during much of the 1920s. Many mid-western farmers were left overextended and scrambling to regroup. To policymakers, academics, and cultural critics it appeared that the yeoman farmer—that mythic hero of nineteenth-century republican virtue—might well become an endangered species. They searched for solutions to slow what was perceived as a national exodus draining talent from the countryside to the city (Atherton; Danbom; Fuller; Kirschner).

Beginning in the 1920s at the University of Wisconsin, and at other land-grant agricultural colleges, reformers such as Professor Terry used radio as an instrument of social and cultural reform (Taylor). State agricultural radio programming in Wisconsin privileged scientific farming methods and the acquisition of new technology over traditional techniques and equipment. It provided weather, crop, and livestock reports and market news. It also celebrated farm family solidarity built on traditional home life, and promoted modern, institutional patterns of community organization in lieu of preexisting folkways.

Many of the cultural reform ideas broadcast into the hinterlands in the 1920s owed their inspiration to the Country Life movement of the previous decade. In 1908 President Theodore Roosevelt established a commission to investigate the woes believed to be afflicting rural America. Country Life ideology combined romanticized notions of an idealized, even mythic rural past with sociological concerns about rural depopulation and the privations and pathologies attributed to life on the farm. A Wisconsin rural sociologist, Charles J.

Galpin, became a chief proponent of rural reforms. He decried the "social handicaps" plaguing Wisconsin farmers and argued that the best remedy was community reconstitution.⁴ Government officials and academics established a set of areas for national reform, including communications ("we create a public opinion favorable to progress"), homemaking, education, farming, governance, health and sanitation, recreation, and morals (Rasmussen; Bowers; Kirkendall).

This case study of WHA in the 1920s analyzes the first decade of agricultural extension radio in Wisconsin and the distinctive social and cultural context in which broadcasting reached rural America. I argue that the words of male and female listeners who "talked back" to its reform-minded urban producers in letters reflect ambivalence toward urban-directed modernization and cultural uplift. Histories of early radio have underreported the extent to which tensions between rural and urban ways of life structured dynamics and listener reactions to early radio. It is also true that male and female farmers differed sharply in their receptivity to reform via radio. Their letters articulate different visions of radio's place and purpose as men and women weathered the challenges of rural life in the 1920s.

The study relies on WHA records, rural social surveys, government documents, local newspapers and journals, and studies of rural Wisconsin and the nation prior to the beginning of broadcasting and during its early years. Above all, it uses information culled from dozens and dozens of listener letters. Station managers scrupulously saved listener correspondence as evidence of their successes and shortfalls in serving the public interest. I use these letters for a slightly different purpose—to map a trajectory of rural listener engagement with radio and to qualitatively assess questions, comments, and suggestions as they reveal shifting desires, expectations, and dreams for state radio as a service in their lives. In quoting from particular letters, I have followed my subjective sense of which of the dozens of letters I examined capture key sentiments, concerns, and issues that seemed representative of the collection as a whole.

In recent years scholars have revealed a far more complicated landscape of audience reception to early radio in the 1920s and early 1930s than previously acknowledged. We know that local and national struggle accompanied the establishment of networks, correcting the assumption that universal approbation and delight greeted direct advertising and corporate control of the airwaves (Smulyan). Congress established the Federal Radio Commission (FRC) to bring order to the airwaves, but the body served less as an impartial arbiter than as a cynical handmaiden for network interests (McChesney; Streeter). Educational, not-for-profit, and independent stations suffered as a result of this bias.

Other scholarly work illuminates the varied ways in which radio listening promoted identity formation. It analyzes marketing and advertising strategies to promote radio. It also considers the phenomenon of "imagined communities" and the formation of a national "radio imaginary" in which listeners negotiated

the symbolic terms of citizenship, gender, class, ethnic, "American," and racial identifications (Barlow; Butsch; Cohen; Douglas; Himes; McFadden; Newman). Studies exploring the formation of multiple publics of listeners are especially relevant, as cultural historians continue to deconstruct assumptions about "mass" audiences and social and cultural formations (Denning; Kammen).

Studies of early radio listeners and programmers in the 1920s and 1930s emphasize the importance of local community context, institutions, and ethnic folkways structuring a negotiation with radio and the resulting aspects of identity formation. In the industrial Northeast, where broadcasting established strong roots by the mid-1920s, programs catered to the quotidian needs of industrial America's multilingual, multiethnic populations. Specialized radio outlets helped to redraw boundaries of social and cultural affiliation, such as Chicago's "Voice of Labor," WCFL, which helped unite multiethnic workers in support of the New Deal (Cohen; Godfried).

Excellent content studies of radio programs aimed at rural audiences suggest the importance of regional differentiation, such as in the Piedmont area, and we are coming to know more about the Midwest and the South (Hall et al.; Grundy). National commercial networks are credited with creating specialized programming to serve rural-to-urban migrants settling in large cities, as well as those remaining in the hinterlands who sought hillbilly and later country music on the airwaves (Peterson). Early commercial radio programs curried favor with rural listeners through programs such as the WLS *Barn Dance* and various home-maker programs for women. They spurred a national and regional, rather than local, listener ethos among fans of hillbilly and country music (Gregory). Researchers have also studied the forms and messages of farm and home shows, emphasizing the manner in which such programs and representations domesticated the technology of radio for American consumers by mobilizing gender stereotypes, promoting consumerism (particularly among women), and celebrating the family ideal (Butsch; Marchand; Smulyan).

A social and cultural historical methodology offers an alternative to working back from radio program texts and representations to reveal the listening publics of rural America. The formulaic nature of farm and home programs cannot be confused with, or substituted for, critical study of the diverse audience of rural Americans engaging these broadcasts and, wherever possible, of their reactions to the shows. Without social and contextual specificity, women on farms of the 1920s, to give but one example, risk becoming a banal stereotype alongside their equally caricatured 1950s white, middle-class suburban sisters.

While the strategies and ideological commitments of the Country Life movement in the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries are well studied (excluding the later role of radio), comparatively little is known about the nature of rural people's reactions to its uplift doctrines. Struggles and negotiations between farmers and progressive reformers over the nature and content of agricultural exten-

sion radio illuminate issues dividing farmers threatened by modernization of agricultural technology and economics from the scientific experts and rational-systems theorists of progressivism in the United States (Barron; Swierenga).

Agricultural extension outreach in Wisconsin dates to the 1880s, but the influence of Progressive Republicans in the state between 1900 and 1938 pushed state agricultural reform policies forward and supported the innovative work of radio in circulating Progressive and Country Life ideals that continued beyond the period studied here. Governor (and later Senator) Robert M. La Follette and his sons, Philip and Robert junior, spearheaded policies to cement a university-state complex and determine the progressive tenor of the state for the rest of the century (McCarthy; Glad).

The story of the retuning of the farm by radio began officially in January 1920, when 9XM (later WHA) became the first licensed station to broadcast in Wisconsin. The following year Professor W. H. Lighty of the Extension Division of the university became the station's first program director. He derived inspiration from the Progressive ideals of university president Charles Van Hise, who declared: "I shall never rest content until the beneficent influences of the University of Wisconsin are made available in every home of the State." Lighty accordingly began to develop radio broadcasts in consultation with a University Radio Committee of twelve faculty advisors appointed by the university president to serve the people of Wisconsin. In cooperation with Lighty, the College of Agriculture began producing a farm program in 1921 and the *Homemaker's Hour* in 1926. It developed its programs through a radio committee of its own that sent one member to the University Radio Committee.⁵

Beginning with its first program and continuing throughout the 1920s, WHA concentrated on serving rural farmers. The midday *Farm Show* supplied weather forecasts, road reports, and market news daily to southern Wisconsin farmers. In 1924 WHA established a link with WLBL, a state-owned station located at Stevens Point in north-central Wisconsin. The farm and home shows originating in Madison could now be heard across much of the state.⁶

A tone of easy informality characterized early written exchanges between listeners and the station. Early listeners wrote to share their joys and travails with the fascinating novelty of radio, to swap know-how, even to solicit technical advice on gadgetry. By the early 1920s farmers had helped make radio a nationwide hobby industry. Farmers preferred home-built crystal and single-tube radio sets for their simplicity and affordability. The *Wisconsin Agriculturist* published a regular radio column, offering tips to farmers such as how to recharge the sets' dry-cell batteries using gasoline-fueled generators that pumped water.⁷

Rural Wisconsin listeners took to radio as a tool and as a welcome source of entertainment linking them to a world outside. They showed no evidence of being mesmerized or intimidated by this new medium. Listeners scribbled notes at the slightest provocation in order to comment on or to share a question about

the wonders of radio. In May 1922 a listener from Brillion wrote bursting with the news that he had just built a radio for \$10.49 worth of parts, not including batteries and the telephone set he had dismembered and converted into a radio receiver. "I don't see how anyone can be without a set," he concluded gleefully.⁸ When writing, listeners routinely mentioned the type of receiver they used and the brand name where applicable, as well as the number of tubes. At least one even mailed penciled circuitry diagrams to the station, hoping for tips on improving the design of his set. Another curious listener wrote Professor Earl M. Terry to ask if the lightning rod of his farmhouse could double as a radio antenna. In a detailed letter Terry explained that a lightning rod could well serve as an antenna, but advised the farmer to inspect his ground connection (Terry carefully described how to do this) lest his radio set, or even his farm, go up in flames.⁹ The neighborliness of these exchanges reflected an initial realization of broadcasting's potential to remap rural and urban geography, bringing the world of the university and the city closer to the population in the countryside.

While the precise penetration rate of radio into everyday rural life is difficult to measure, communal patterns of use on a significant scale are evident by 1925. By the end of 1927, one in five farm households owned a radio. In the prosperous southern counties of the state, close to Madison and WHA, however, the figure was much higher, averaging more than one set for every three households. Group listening and sharing patterns that were commonplace among farm listeners broadened the rural audience considerably. Owners might invite their radioless friends to hear a concert or a game with them. The *Wisconsin Agriculturist* entreated its rural readers to host "radio parties" to share and celebrate this "new American delight." In modest farm households, owners treated radio as a luxury, reserving it for occasions when it could be enjoyed in a cooperative spirit among family and friends. For those without surplus fuel to power generators, listening alone would be "wasteful" of expensive battery power (only 36% of the state had electricity as late as 1940). Moreover, it denied the collective pleasures of group listening.¹⁰

The early WHA broadcast schedule operated in counterpoint to the rhythms of the farming day. The farm program, produced by personnel from the agricultural college, aired six days a week at midday to reach farmers in from the fields for dinner with their families. The station broadcast the show from 12:30 P.M. to 1:00, then signed off for the rest of the afternoon, while farmers were in the fields, and returned to the air for several hours in the early evening.¹¹ WHA produced the first farm program of its kind in the state, and even after other stations imitated its neighborly mixture of market information and talk and began shows of their own, the popularity of the original *Farm Show* endured.

Evening cultural programs began appearing after 1921 on WHA and ranged from "moral talks" and liberal arts lectures delivered by university faculty to classical concerts featuring the university's orchestra and Big Ten sporting events.

These programs were designed to educate and entertain the farm family and bring them into a closer relationship with university life. By 1925 evening broadcasts began presenting regular talks promoting scientific farming techniques as well as domestic science topics for women; the *Homemaker's Hour* debuted the following year and became a smash hit.¹²

Prior to the introduction of the WHA *Farm Show*, market news reached the countryside via telegraph to post offices, banks, general stores, and newspaper offices. Farmers congregated in these central places, often found at county crossroads, to jot down the latest quotations. Keeping abreast of crucial market fluctuations closer to harvest and slaughtering time must have been a nuisance for farmers hesitant to squander time off the farm. WHA radio obviated the need for a special trip to town, a visit to a neighbor, or a series of telephone calls (assuming one owned a phone) to get an update on the market or an impending rainstorm or frost. Farmers such as Herman Leitz of Ripon responded heartily to the convenience, reporting that he listened to the *Farm Show* every day and that "I think it a very nice thing for the farmer."¹³

Even as the audience for the farm and evening programs grew larger, there were reminders that kinks remained in synchronizing broadcasts with the ingrained patterns of working farmers. Ezra Smith of Lodi wrote WHA in the spring of 1923 to share his appreciation for midday Sunday church services but complained that the timing of the lectures in the evening conflicted with his regular chores. W. J. Heberlieu of Portage expressed a similar conflict when he wrote: "If these programs are for the farmers I am sorry they couldn't be about one hour later say at 8 o'clock as 90% of the farmers are in the midst of the milking process."¹⁴ Without resources to conduct systematic audience research, WHA operators necessarily relied on written feedback in order to gauge the successes or failures of their programs and to make the necessary schedule adjustments to maximize its impact on life in the countryside.

From requests for an evening grace period in which to milk the cows to listener queries about circuits and antennas, rural listener letters to WHA reveal a tacit relationship between themselves and state station personnel. Farmers and WHA programmers in the early era looked to each other as new and mutually supporting neighbors. Listeners used WHA's farm service and readily consulted the technical know-how of station engineers in meeting their particular needs. WHA programmers studied listener difficulties and attempted to provide satisfactory solutions. Programmers mapped farm correspondence to chart their broadcasting range and even sent queries to listeners asking them to tune in and report reception quality when the station ran tests of new equipment.¹⁵ The bonds of reciprocity that rural historians often attribute to agricultural communities prior to modernization found new virtual outlets of expression during an era of "neighborliness" on the state airwaves, when the interests of listeners and those of the station sat in a delicate balance (Neth; Pederson; Osterud).

Smitten by radio's allegedly beneficial effect on rural family togetherness, *Country Life* advocates added their voices to the chorus celebrating radio in the countryside. With little evidence to back the claim, they applauded radio for bringing the modern world to the farmers of rural America without the negative centrifugal pull attributed to other recent technologies. "Automobiles and good roads have tended to take farmers away from home," wrote Floyd H. Lynn, secretary of the Farmers Education and Cooperative Union of America:

The radio, on the other hand, tends to keep these same folks at home . . . [it is] a counterinfluence . . . to those influences which have come with mechanical and scientific development and which have had the tendency to eliminate or stifle the social life and identity of rural communities.¹⁶

By this logic, unlike the automobile, radio presented no immediate threat of carrying rural people off the farm to towns and cities in search of new forms of recreation and public leisure. In a sense, it served as a model technology from a *Country Life* perspective. Radio could educate and entertain without overexciting. It instilled the contentment deemed necessary to keep folks down on the farm. Radio seemingly anchored rural families in place and kept them happy and productive.¹⁷

Radio manufacturers promoted agricultural programming to sweeten their pitches to rural customers. By 1925 advertisements appeared regularly in the *Wisconsin Agriculturist* touting radio for inculcating country values and promoting family togetherness. Atwater-Kent, another manufacturer, invoked rural tastes when it proclaimed, "There are no songs like the old songs" and recommended purchasing a radio since it "keeps the boys and girls at home." Rural parents feared for the morals of their sons and daughters on summer evenings, but the greatest fear of all may have been the specter of young adults deserting the country for the city.

Set manufacturers and rural radio programmers used overlapping appeals that portrayed radio as a beacon leading the modern farmer, farm woman, and farm family away from the ills of backwardness, inefficiency, and cultural isolation associated with farm life, and toward occupational, social, and cultural fulfillment. "You can make Radiola 20 pay for itself in better crops," declared one advertisement, alluding to the farm programming on WHA and other Midwestern stations. The Radiola 20 became a surrogate of farm extension, since it guaranteed a sound so clear that it was "as though the head of the agricultural college had dropped in for a chat with you personally."¹⁸

The Radiola ad reflected a shift in radio programs under way at WHA and elsewhere. As early as the mid-1920s, WHA programming began to shift away from its role as a neighborly service—a virtual country crossroads for farmers—toward a more aggressive instrument of agricultural extension work. County

agents, the foot soldiers of progressive agricultural reform, began increasingly appearing not on farmers' doorsteps but on their radio sets. These agents had traditionally worked alongside farmers in the countryside, recruiting them for membership in sanctioned cooperative associations such as the Farm Bureau, encouraging rural communities to engage in youth, women's, and community club work, and conducting public relations for the state's agricultural policies (Baker; Neth).

As the novelty of radio wore off and its potential impact and uses grew more evident, the university's Agricultural Extension Division began developing new ideas for rural programming. These explorations brought state radio increasingly into the orbit of technical and organizational agricultural extension work and substantively affected interactions between rural listeners and programmers as the decade wore on. Beyond its spatial reach, radio offered intriguing avenues for continuing and expanding the mission of extension work into farm living rooms and distributing knowledge and expertise from the university's agricultural laboratories and lecture halls.

Aside from traversing spatial divides, radio programs, if skillfully produced, offered an authoritative mode of address considerably more engaging than written circulars or bulletins. At the same time, it was ephemeral and hence less direct than the physical imposition of a county agent drumming up enthusiasm for a program before an audience of exhausted or even hostile farmers. Radio could lengthen the reach of organizational extension work without entirely sacrificing the "human" side of county agent work. Radio no longer served exclusively as a neighborly link, but instead became an electronic supplement to the state's "human" face (the county agent) charged with currying favor with the rural farm family while also instructing it.

In the spring of 1925 C. L. Fluke, a professor of agriculture, contacted county agents across the state to discuss using WHA radio to transmit his agricultural lectures as a supplement to their work. A few exhibited skepticism toward the technology itself: "Yes, I am interested in radio," replied county agent Milton Button from West Bend, "but not to the extent [sic] of separating myself from any cold cash for one."¹⁹ Others such as J. F. Thomas, based in Waukesha, agreed that the idea of agricultural lectures specifically for farmers sounded extremely promising: "I believe the older people will be interested in such talks. . . . I will be glad to ask a number of farmers who have radios, how they like the sort of program mentioned." S. Mathisen of Sheboygan Falls reported that a sizeable radio audience already existed for this kind of programming: "I have spoken to a few in this county who watch and take advantage of things that are broadcasted in which they are especially interested."²⁰

County agents agreed to use their publicity skills to promote WHA program offerings and to provide farmers and county newspapers with advance listings of talks and special features. In late April Professor Fluke inaugurated what would

become a regular feature of agricultural science broadcasts for farmers: appearing behind the microphone to discuss projects in their districts.²¹

Correspondence indicates that male and female WHA listeners appreciated technical programs from the university. Market news and weather service consistently garnered a warm reception. But the cultural offerings of WHA, in which liberal arts professors addressed farmers, and which were deemed crucial to the cultural dimension of rural radio reform, prompted mixed reactions. A number of male farmers expressed impatience with evening programming that smacked of "education" for its own sake or offered cultural uplift in the form of liberal arts lectures. After an exhausting day of physical labor, many farmers could not muster the enthusiasm or the mental energy for a university lecture.

Some farmers found the educational talk such an affront that they banded together to lodge a collective protest. In a formally worded and carefully typed letter, five residents of Darlington in Lafayette County notified the station of their collective disaffection:

However much we appreciate the efforts of the extension division of the University . . . these lectures have become an absolute nuisance. A lecture weekly would be all right, but we, after our day spent about our business, desire, in the evening, to listen to musical programs, news items, weather, market reports, etc., but your station comes in so strong that no set in Darlington seems to be about to tune you out.

These farmers found WHA's emphasis on "education" and university cultural outreach wearisome and not necessarily reflective of their backgrounds or interests as farmers. It was easy enough to bolt the door when a county agent came to call, but lectures over the radio were harder to avoid by rural listeners. The powerful signal from the WHA transmitter combined with the forceful uplift agenda of the programming appeared to exert an almost overpowering effect on the listener.²²

If some listeners balked at the content of cultural talks, others disliked the way they were delivered. The speaking styles of professors unaccustomed to addressing a lone microphone in a studio took some listeners aback. "Your voice came in last night in good shape," wrote A. N. Kelly of Mineral Point, "but I thought it sounded a little scared." Throat clearing, odd pauses, paper rustling, or even a nervous croak would not have been uncommon from speakers lacking experience and confidence with radio. Lecturers sometimes had difficulty compressing their ideas into the ten to fifteen minutes allotted to each broadcast segment. Speakers rushed to finish on time or ran over into the next segment, much to the consternation of the director in the control room. After one lecture, a puzzled listener from Orangeville, Illinois, wrote to inquire: "Who was the announcer and why was he so 'rattled'?"²³ Some professors simply refused to speak on the air at all and transcribed their remarks for an announcer to deliver.



1921. Professor Earle M. Terry (seated) and professor William H. Lighty of WHA at the University of Wisconsin-Madison. Officials used radio as a tool of rural social and cultural uplift. University of Wisconsin-Madison Archives.

Others refused to participate in the Extension Division's plan to make the Wisconsin airwaves a virtual lecture hall for working-class farmers. They defended their hesitance to participate by explaining that radio was "undignified."²⁴

The eclecticism of the nightly WHA offerings may also have contributed to a sense of listener disorientation, especially when juxtaposed with the topical familiarity of the *Farm Show*. While the midday show featured some music with its market and weather forecasts, its strength lay in its clear utility, consistent style, and uniform content. Nighttime broadcasts, however, ranged widely in subject and scope. Following the pioneering work of Professor Fluke in 1925, Monday evenings were devoted to the *Agricultural and Home Economics Program*, and consisted of extension lectures and domestic science themes. Wednesdays featured a mixture of educational lectures in the liberal arts and music, often without a unifying theme.

The rundown for Wednesday, 7 December 1928, is illustrative of the ambitions of cultural programmers to provide serious and uplifting content on these nights and their willingness to present an eclectic and broad definition of programming to serve the rural farmer. The evening began at 7:15 P.M. with "Negro Dialect Readings," featuring Miss Vivian Monk, Department of English, followed by "Psychoanalysis," with Mr. F. G. Mueller of the Department of Psychology.

Programmers then injected a practical segment: "How to Select Wood for Strength," by Mr. L. J. Markwardt, Forest Products Laboratory, at 7:40, before continuing with poetry in "Selections from Masefield" and then "Music by the Haresfoot Orchestra." The evening closed with a short story in Spanish.²⁵ The blend of dialect readings and Masefield, a popular writer known for his colorful colloquialisms, suggests—if not the roots of free-form radio—the balancing act that promoters of liberal arts uplift by radio practiced to keep the average listener engaged.

Fan letters indicate that both male and female rural listeners listened to the *Agricultural and Home Economics Program* and to the Wednesday cultural and liberal arts broadcasts. Although specific cases of listeners objecting to university "experts" lecturing on farming matters do not surface in station correspondence, it is significant that WHA chose to include talks by male farmers as well as agricultural professors as the decade wore on. In December 1927, for example, William Buth of Grafton spoke to his fellow farmers in "How I Obtained the Highest Herd Average in Wisconsin Dairy Improvement Associations." On another night, Otto Onstad of Cambridge presented "Practical Ideas in Tobacco Farming." Perhaps the talks commanded more respect coming from working farmers than from a professor or technician with clean fingernails at the agricultural college. Just as commercial advertising discovered the power of the testimonial to sell products, the extension programmers of WHA relied on the power of local farmers as authoritative subjects. Perhaps farmers appreciated hearing from their own along with the "expert" testimony provided by agricultural college professors in departments such as animal husbandry, agronomy, and horticulture. Other talks promoted the beneficial effects of cultivating affiliations with the agricultural college, such as one by John Perkins, a student, entitled "Why I Am Taking the Course in Agriculture."²⁶

The desire of progressive broadcasters to develop an on-air community linking rural listeners to the university faced some of its greatest challenges and controversies when WHA failed to broadcast an important Wisconsin athletic contest or attempted to schedule lectures or classical music on a game night. Beginning in 1921 WHA began broadcasting basketball games from the university armory. In order to hear Big Ten sports live, listeners willingly suffered the poor sound quality of the remote broadcasts, nighttime reception difficulties, and the distorted shrieks of student announcers, who sometimes screamed into the microphone. As S. B. Robinson of Montello observed after an early broadcast: "You could not tell whether you had a dogfight or a basketball game."²⁷

Historians have noted the critical role of sports broadcasts in consolidating enthusiasm for chain and network radio during the 1920s and 1930s (Barnouw; MacDonald; Smulyan; Douglas). Chain and network broadcasts built national audiences for prizefights, horse races, football games, and the World Series. Sports fandom became one example of radio's "imagined community" spanning geo-

graphical divides and ethnocultural differences. In broadcasting Wisconsin sports to the hinterlands, WHA catalyzed new forms of a local, gendered "radio imaginary" among male farmers.²⁸ Sports broadcasts from Madison provided men with a diversion from farm worries, offered a distinctive service to state fans, and strengthened patterns of rural heterosocial behavior in which men gathered to hear the news at the county crossroads. Farmers headed for their local hardware or village country store on game nights, transforming these public spaces into festive gathering places on evenings when WHA carried Big Ten basketball games. L. Leunenberger, a dealer in general hardware, stoves, and oils in De Forest, wrote on March 26, 1927: "The two games were received and greatly appreciated by the whole crowd that gathers here every game."²⁹ A similar letter from Donaldson Brothers General Hardware outside of Madison reported that games produced a packed house of between twenty and twenty-five enthusiastic listeners. Turning the culture of expertise represented by extension work on its head, sports fans wrote often to WHA, offering trivia on opposing teams and suggesting stylistic tips for the collegiate play-by-play announcers. Frequently these letters featured multiple signatures—ten or more was not uncommon—as if to bear witness to the group effect that occurred as radio audiences congregated throughout the state.

Hearing the university band strike up "On Wisconsin" and the roar of the crowd while gathered around a loudspeaker in a home or country store miles from the nearest paved road or streetlight cannot have failed to delight male farmers. Nighttime sportscasts created a new kind of social event, fostering interaction that complemented, but remained distinct from, local club meetings, cooperative organization events, and church outings where men and women were present. Congregating around a set provided by a local merchant, who might sell drinks or food during time-outs and between halves, men could cheer on their team in a manner that might not be welcome in the family living room or parlor. In this way WHA furnished a welcome brand of extension service, bringing rural male sports lovers together and promoting ties not over farming techniques or high culture, but over a shared passion for university athletic competitions and manly conversation and companionship.

On occasions where programmers chose not to broadcast an important game, listeners "talked back" with howls of protest and a blizzard of correspondence. A male farmer from Baraboo wrote: "We were very much disappointed not to receive the game Monday night . . . we hope you will try and arrange those programs so we can hear some basketball as well as farm problems."³⁰ As an editorial in the *Orfordville Journal* reasoned: "We are all supposed to be boosters for the sports of the University, then why not give us some of the entertainment when there is an opportunity."³¹

Letters from rural sports fans betray the suspicions and underlying ill will some male farmers harbored toward the university progressive reform community and those in power at WHA. One angry listener accused the state station of

hubris in substituting a university lecturer on a game night. "The world's worst was pulled last night," he fumed.

I think the Professors out there surely have a lot of confidence in themselves when they think they can entertain a radio audience. . . . After listening to the Profs. talk I know why athletic coaches get so much money.³²

The failure of professors to entertain rural listeners challenged their competence as station leaders. It may also have fueled perceptions of second-class citizenship among rural residents. As one listener suggested, more basketball on the radio might ease tensions between farmers and urban dwellers, who were more likely to be able to afford to attend games in Madison: "By doing this you are winning more freinds [sic] and the feeling between the towns people and University will be more mutual as there was sort of a dissatisfied feeling between them on account of the ticket situation."³³

Walter J. Duborg of Fall River hatched an elaborate theory about missed basketball broadcasts on WHA. He believed that a vindictive station management was waging cultural war on sports-loving farmers by deliberately canceling games at the last minute.

The director's voice as he announced the game would not be broadcast was filled with antagonistic satisfaction that he would disappoint the basketball fans. . . . WHA belongs to the people of Wisconsin and not to a few.

In the style of citizens demanding democratic political rights, ten male listeners from Edgerton filed a letter in the form of a petition, demanding complete basketball team coverage on WHA. Music was plentiful on other stations, they argued, but carrying state team sports constituted WHA's *raison d'être* on the airwaves. Farmers implied that loyalty to their state station would be won through the uniquely cathartic diversions of basketball rather than through a classical concert or a lecture on scientific farming.

"Talking back" to the state and the university over the issue of sports on WHA signified more than a mere declaration of passion for Big Ten basketball. Rural listeners wrote to challenge the WHA programming bias toward the effeminate domain of high culture. Joe Dierauer of Cedarburg wrote mockingly:

What does the average fan care about symphonies [sic] and sapranos [sic] on such a night. What we want is to see what our boys can do to Ohio. Why not put such interesting events out on the air instead of hogging all the fun over there. Incidentally, the broadcasting of such event will surely encourage many young lads to attend our own university instead of going over to Michigan or Notre Dame.³⁴

Dierauer conveys an awareness of the Progressive aspirations of WHA programmers to foster listener loyalty and connection to the state of Wisconsin. Failure to respond to Wisconsin citizens' need for sports entertainment risked spurring a defection to Michigan or Notre Dame. Dierauer's letter invoked the worst fear of Country Life activists—that "symphonies" and "sopranos" would not ameliorate but instead exacerbate rural disenchantment to such a level that a generation of virile Badger fans would decamp to Ann Arbor or South Bend, never to return. His argument implied that keeping male listeners rooting by their radios for the home team might help keep their feet planted in the countryside, thus accomplishing one of WHA's chief ambitions.

The way that rural sports radio listeners constituted a politicized community by invoking their state's rights to obtain programs they wanted challenges the standard complaint about the deleterious effects of modern technology on rural patterns of social and cultural organization (Pederson; Barron; Atherton). The case of basketball indicates the way that consumer publics appropriate and use technology, particularly communications technology, for their own needs. WHA radio listening was very much a shared pastime that fostered rather than weakened community social life and, in the particular case of sports broadcasts, became a cause around which farmers joined their voices in organized protest.

Through devices such as multiple signatures and speaking of themselves in terms ranging from "we" to "our boys," rural male sports fans expressed themselves as a unified political constituency. They banded together as the voice of manly rural localism pitted against the state station's effete cultural autocracy. In sharp contrast to the "neighborly" exchanges of the early period of listener expression, these listeners entwined gender and political rights, speaking of the obligations of the state to "young lads." They recognized that WHA represented state and university power, and that their sole recourse in staking a claim to the airwaves required unity and strong arguments.

Rural women expressed listening patterns, tastes, and communicative strategies of "talking back" that contrast noticeably with those of male farmers. For every letter sent by a male listener such as Frank Walter of Fox Lake, who declared the "Shakespeare very fine," or Lyle Cors, membership secretary of the Young Men's Christian Association in Beloit, who found classical music a "welcome interlude to . . . hours of beery baseball broadcasts," there were multiple letters written by female farmers praising WHA's educational lectures and classical concerts.³⁵ Apparently the WHA station policy of favoring the classical music that so incensed C. H. Alsmeyer and left many male sports fans muttering in disgust delighted women on farms. Mrs. A. K. Bassett of Ski-Hi Farm in Baraboo wrote that she and her husband listened to the farm program at noon, but she reserved her warmest congratulations for the classical performances of the university band. Josephine Hadley Pierce of Taycheedah summed up what appealed to her most about WHA: "It is such a relief when nearly every broad-

casting station is blaring jazz to find one station that consistently gives us good music." She went on to request that more university lectures be added to the schedule: "There were so many good things I had to miss in my four years attendance there," she wrote. From the standpoint of women on farms, musical and educational programs cemented their affection for state radio and served the distinct needs of women living in rural circumstances.³⁶

Whereas some male farmers expressed suspicion or hostility toward male professors speaking to them on matters educational and cultural, women on farms who wrote to the station responded quite differently to uplift of this kind. Letters suggest that they found the connection with the university enriching, rather than threatening, and hoped to sustain or strengthen it. Mrs. W. L. Clawson wrote expressing her gratitude to WHA for bringing its educational and cultural resources into her farmhouse, particularly for its benefit on male members of the household: "We are glad to get the farm talk from the university when the men can hear them," she wrote. Another listener added: "[You've] given busy farmers a chance to listen and know of our university activities."³⁷ These women's voices support the idea that while farming could be a lonely occupation for both men and women, the combination of geographical isolation and the housework and child care burdens borne by women produced a sense of longing for, or at least a curiosity about, urban life. While many women, particularly unmarried girls, left the country for the city, extension radio brought news and possibilities of alternative worlds that lay beyond the circumscribed world of female farmers, most of whom were married (Meyerowitz).

In 1925 a short story appeared in *The Farmer's Wife*, a widely circulated mid-western magazine, that embodied some of the vague yearnings WHA's female listeners expressed for a synthesis of farm life and urban culture. "To the Farm by Radio" was a whimsical but suggestive story about the effects of radio on the lives of one rural farm family. "What has radio life done for us?" the narrator, a farm woman, muses. "It has made life over." She proceeds to describe how radio converts a humdrum day on the farm into a blissful experience for the entire family. In the morning radio supplies the intellectually curious woman on the farm with news of the world without requiring that she leave the home or burn the bread. At noon the radio picks up the market news, enabling the rural family not only to compete in the marketplace but to master it. "We know just as much as the elevator men and buyers do and just as soon," declares the narrator. "We know when to hold and when to sell."³⁸

The story extols the civilizing powers of radio upon the rough-hewn farmer sensibility. The paean to radio life reaches its peak when the female narrator walks into the barn to find a miraculous sight: "Daddy milking, with the head piece on and listening to Beethoven's *Ninth Symphony*." Beyond its lampoon of the straw-nibbling rural male transformed into a sophisticate, the image reveals a deeper wish on the part of the female heroine for rural life and urban culture to converge.

Radio represents a force to vanquish women's frustrations and anxieties about rural life (isolation, economic impotence, and cultural backwardness) and cure the stereotype that country folk lack sophistication and polish. In the story, radio proves able to bring the best of the city to the farm without disturbing the distinctive charms of country life.³⁹ Even as the tale leaves the narrator happily with her husband and children on the farm, it suggests the power of radio to female farmers, and perhaps to male farmers too, who are holding on to a dream of a life enriched by the excitement and stimulation that only a city can offer.

While WHA radio may not have been able to magically transform the lives of rural Wisconsin women as envisioned in the story, it did in 1926 at last provide a daily program targeted exclusively to their interests. Under the guidance of Professor Edith E. Hoyt of the university's Extension Division, the *Homemaker's Hour* aired on WHA six mornings a week.⁴⁰ Denying the fact that many female farmers worked alongside men in physically demanding settings outside the farmhouse, the program devoted itself to supporting the daily routines of the farm woman, boosting her morale, and (ideally) overcoming whatever jealousies she might have of her city sisters. Across the country, broadcasts emphasized the principles of "domestic science" in the farm household as well as the joys and travails of life as envisioned through the prism of Country Life ideology.

Each day the program featured "Music of the Home," educational talks, and readings. Despite its gendered limitations, women enjoyed the neighborly yet informative tone of the programs and wrote to the program regularly. "I appreciate your 'Homemaker's Hour' so much," began a typical letter from Mrs. D. B. Bennett of DeForest:

May I ask for a copy of "Some Ways of Using the Veg. We Now Have," and would it be possible to get a copy of what the man said about the Philippines? Just heard the ending, and from that I judge it must have been very interesting.⁴¹

The program supplied listeners with a weekly bulletin of program offerings (its mailing list swelled to seven thousand names by the 1930s). It also invited women to obtain university Extension Service circulars on a wide array of topical issues, ranging from health and nutrition to housekeeping tips, recipes, and ideas for games and activities to amuse farm children.⁴²

The scheduling of the *Homemaker's Hour* at midmorning meshed with daily farm rhythms. The program served as a companion that ran during a time of day where men were out of the house and women controlled the radio set. Women on farms might have had to share the party telephone line, but for several hours prior to the *Farm Show*, the radio was all theirs (Jellison; Smulyan). Just as male farmers gathered at the county crossroads stores in the evenings for group listening, female farmers sometimes adjusted their chore schedules in order to listen to morning programs with neighbors or in the company of their local

women's club. Whether listening alone or in groups, however, women on farms found WHA a welcome antidote to their tiring and repetitive tasks. As Anna S. Bang of Mount Horeb eloquently phrased it, "The prosaic task of mending socks became an exalted occupation while listening to Dr. Mills' concert," and Mrs. Rufus Gillette declared, "These programs make mending overalls a pleasure. It is worthwhile to be a farmer's wife in Wisconsin."⁴³ These were not self-conscious testimonials, but letters written spontaneously to the station indicating the kinds of impacts these programs were having on rural women's experience.

It is tempting to speculate on how the *Homemaker's Hour* won rural Wisconsin women's allegiances so successfully that it became the most popular WHA program on the air. In the autumn of 1928 both NBC and CBS networks began producing big-budget home shows of their own, yet WHA's version managed to build and retain a large audience. The CBS *Radio Homemaker's Club*, for example, was a big-budget affair, produced in a three-room studio, featuring a modern kitchen, a salon, and a bedroom/boudoir set. It celebrated the well-equipped, modern domestic environment and focused entirely on domestic science, home design, and cooking. Nevertheless, for all of its flash and modern appliances, it did not eclipse WHA's successes.⁴⁴

One clue that emerges in reviewing WHA program schedules is the range of topics and issues the *Homemaker's Hour* covered. For all of the predictable domestic segments devoted to subjects such as "Timely Hints on Home Meat Canning" or "Individuality in Dress for the Elderly Woman," there were also reports by the Wisconsin Women's Legislative Council and discussions of parent-teacher issues.⁴⁵ It appears that the program expanded the gendered bounds of traditional notions of rural domesticity, serving as a forum for rural Wisconsin women organizing politically on local, state, and national levels.

In 1928 Professor Edith Hoyt, *Homemaker's Hour* chief, received a letter from Theodora Youmans of the Wisconsin Federation of Women's Clubs seeking information about providing "talks on the air on governmental and political topics" to WHA's female listeners. Professor Hoyt responded positively: "I am sure some arrangement can be made by which radio can be utilized in this desirable and practical way." It appears that even as WHA offered discussions of traditional rural homemaking and folkways, its women's programming sustained a variety of voices and outlooks on women's work and women's place in rural society that may have garnered special listener interest and support.⁴⁶

The 1929 stock market crash and the Depression accelerated rather than clipped WHA's role as an instrument of Progressivism and social reform. In Wisconsin the economic cataclysm prompted a massive expansion of state radio. Buoyed by Progressive Party dominance under Governor Philip La Follette and by the economic infusions of President Roosevelt's New Deal programs, WHA became an ever more active player in state affairs. In ten years (1928-1938) broadcast time increased sixfold, to fifty-four hours per week. Federal works

projects funds supported a massive overhaul of broadcasting facilities, and new studios were built at virtually no cost to the state.⁴⁷

In the early 1930s, at the nadir of the Depression, WHA launched a full-scale program of supplementary education aimed at children. The *Wisconsin School of the Air* marked the crowning achievement of electronic cultural intervention, reaching tens of thousands of elementary-school kids in classrooms supplied with radios across the state. Its daily courses covered topics such as classical music appreciation, good citizenship, and club work. To assist youths who had been forced to defer high school or to drop out entirely due to economic hardship, the *Wisconsin College of the Air* was established. For these and other programs, both state and national educational leaders hailed WHA as a sterling example of radio furthering state service.⁴⁸

By the 1930s WHA had firmly established itself as a beacon of reform and social outreach. In a decade it had evolved through several stages. WHA began as a niche service provider that focused on offering brief market, weather, and road reports to area farmers. In a few years its novelty status gave way to a phase of neighborly exchange between a growing listenership and a state radio outlet still testing its equipment and defining its reform mission. Programs aimed to appeal to families as well as farmers were added in the evenings. In these years WHA continued to learn about its audience and their interests—who listened and why. Rural listeners, in turn, learned about and often challenged the nature of the state's commitment to building a service relationship between its university and the countryside through radio.

During the mid-1920s WHA's success with its midday and evening programs garnered attention within agricultural extension and Country Life circles. Radio entered the orbit of agricultural technical and organizational extension work as well as cultural uplift programs. The weekly agricultural and domestic science programs, featuring talks from farmers and experts, lecture nights with liberal arts professors, and the introduction of the *Homemaker's Hour* highlight the maturing middle phase. By decade's end WHA broadcast a diverse array of agricultural and domestic science programs and educational and cultural features to educate and modernize rural listeners. The WHA electronic "neighborhood" had transmogrified into a statewide conduit for agricultural extension work and for university-driven cultural interventions designed to encourage rural social uplift.

Listener letters indicate that the transition from a neighborly station identity to a more formal, state-centered one generated mixed reactions in the countryside, especially among male farmers. Many felt uncomfortable with, or at least ill-served by, the educational and high cultural thrust of the station. Often the programs seemed too esoteric or out of step with male farmers' needs. The relentless focus on rural organization and agricultural modernization grew tiresome. As Henry A. Wallace recalled, "Farm papers, county agents, Departments of Agriculture, et al., talking to farmers in terms of this necessity [moderniza-

tion] readily formulated a creed which in effect is 'Great is the God Efficiency and the County Agent is his prophet.'"⁴⁹ In expressing their wishes for "basketball, as well as farm problems," male farmers vented frustrations at the reform agenda of WHA programmers. By the end of the 1920s, what had begun in the spirit of an experimental and neighbor-to-neighbor partnership between broadcasters and listeners was replaced by a formal, at times contested consumer/producer dynamic, in its extreme cases pitting angry listeners (who were also taxpayers) against the state, "talking back" about how WHA should not be controlled by the urban elite "few."

Female farmers responded much more positively to developments in educational and cultural outreach than did their male counterparts. Despite not having a program of their own until 1926, women rewarded WHA's support of classical music and liberal arts lectures by becoming ardent station boosters. Their enthusiasm for the *Homemaker's Hour* made it the most popular WHA offering. It created a forum for women's concerns that transcended the closed confines of the farm household domestic sphere to embrace more worldly concerns. The popularity of this program suggests an area in where progressive reform radio may have achieved its goal (whether intentionally or not) of supporting rural family and social life while enriching ties between female farmers, women connected with the university (such as Edith Hoyt), and society at large.

One of the revelations of WHA listener correspondence is the extent to which male and female listeners supported programs dedicated to improving farming techniques and home economics but split decisively over cultural uplift. Male farmers appeared willing to cede their local authority to scientific techniques promoted by agricultural extension. The agricultural college had been in place for decades, so in a general sense radio carried a familiar message. But men actively resisted radio as a bearer of messages of cultural uplift. At these moments they perceived radio as a cultural interloper—bringing odd musical sounds and ideas associated with effete cosmopolitanism into their lives unbidden. Male farmers championed old-time music and sports broadcasts as manly program alternatives to such uplift. Female farmers showed far greater acceptance of new forms of "rural" culture and supported the cultural programs bringing fresh ideas into their homes. The fact that so many women wrote to WHA asking for *more* of these programs indicates the novelty and importance of radio as a link to a wider world beyond the farm.

Farm women's responses to radio, in particular, raise a central irony of the character of reform radio. Even as it sought to redirect rural work and social patterns to foster productivity and sustain a love for rural living, radio brought tantalizing sounds and ideas from the world beyond the rural fringe. It may also have validated female farmers' desires for wider social horizons than were permissible on most Wisconsin farms. However much Country Life advocates argued to the contrary, state agricultural radio may actually have heightened the

attractions of urban life—highlighted in cultural programs such as classical music or thought-provoking lectures about politics—and consequently had the effect of loosening the bonds that tied farm men and women to the land.

The significance of the story of WHA's first decade is threefold. It shows that the specific goals and operations of agricultural extension stations, such as WHA, differentiate them in important ways from other educational, independent, and commercial stations. Rural radio reform combined extension work and Country Life ideology to redefine the techniques of farming as well as rejuvenate and reform rural culture through educational programming and uplift. Second, the responses of rural Americans talking back to urban radio producers reveals the importance of factoring in rural versus urban social and cultural differences in evaluating listener uses of radio. Wisconsin farmers requesting that broadcasts be rescheduled so as not to conflict with their chores, women on farms seeking to expand their horizons by asking for copies of lectures, and groups of male sports lovers petitioning for more Big Ten basketball show the range of needs among rural listeners and their attempts to meet those needs through direct communication with programmers. Finally, the strikingly different responses to uplift among men and women reveal stark gender divisions in rural America in the 1920s. These letters illustrate how radio had the potential to threaten, validate, or alter a listener's sense of self in a decade in which women were achieving new degrees of social, political, and cultural power. One historian of the Country Life movement suggests that its combination of forward-looking efforts to modernize agriculture and a backward-looking perspective on the idealized rural past doomed the movement to failure.⁵⁰ The story told here suggests that WHA attempted to reinvent the "rural" via radio as much as reconstitute it. The veneer of conservatism surrounding progressive reform may distract us from the demonstrated impact of these programs as they raised questions about gender relations in rural Wisconsin. The *Homemaker's Hour* may have reified aspects of "traditional" gender relations, but it also stimulated a forum for discussion of men's and women's place in a new era in which country and city were becoming more closely linked and paradoxically differentiated by technology. Further research of media producer/consumer relationships surrounding radio's introduction into American life will offer scholars a growing base upon which to reconsider Americans' subsequent engagement with network broadcasting and the problematic category of mass culture that emerged in the 1930s.

Notes

1. Correspondence, 21 Feb. 1925; 27 Feb. 1925. University Extension, Educational Communications, WHA Radio and Television (hereafter WHA Papers), 02-4, Box 1. Emphasis in the original.
2. Correspondence, 21 Feb. 1925; 27 Feb. 1925. WHA Papers, 02-4, Box 1.
3. The census defined "rural" as areas of population with fewer than 2,500 persons.

4. J. Galpin, *The Social Anatomy of the Rural Community* (Madison: U of Wisconsin P, 1915), 34. Agricultural Experiment Station at the University of Wisconsin.
5. Van Hise qtd, in Harold McCarty, "WHA, Wisconsin's Radio Pioneer," *The Wisconsin Blue Book* (Madison: Wisconsin Legislative Reference library, 1937). 198.
6. According to the *Variety Radio Directory* 1937-38, there were in 1937 approximately eight stations in operation in Wisconsin whose origins dated to the 1920s. These ranged from low-power stations owned by newspapers in Fond du Lac, Racine, and Sheboygan, established between 1922 and 1924, to stations such as WTMJ in Milwaukee and WISN in Madison, which became affiliates of the National Broadcasting Company in the late twenties, and WKBH in La Crosse, which affiliated with CBS.
7. In 1928 an estimated 63% of radio owners owned manufactured sets. It was noted, however, that crystal and single-tube models were still "in wide use on farms and rural sections." United States. Federal Radio Commission, *Second Annual Report of the Federal Radio Commission* (Washington: GPO, 1928).
8. Correspondence, 16 May 1922, WHA, 02-4, Box 1. The average cost of a good factory set in 1925 based on prices advertised in the *Wisconsin Agriculturist and Farmer* ranged from \$35 to \$90.
9. Correspondence, WHA Papers, Box 1, 02-4. See also Reynold Wik, "The USDA and the Development of Radio," *Agricultural History* 62 (1988): 178.
10. Wisconsin radio statistics by county in US Department of Agriculture and Wisconsin Department of Agriculture, *Crop Reporting Service, Bulletin* 90 (1926-27): 94. The 1930 figure reported in U.S. Bureau of the Census, Abstract of the Fifteenth Census of the United States (Washington: GPO, 1933). Quote from *Wisconsin Agriculturist and Farmer*, 23 Oct. 1926: 19.
11. It is not known precisely how many hours WHA was permitted to broadcast in the early 1920s. In 1928 the Federal Radio Commission permitted WHA to broadcast about eight hours per week and transmit at 750 watts of power. "First Annual Report of the Committee on Radio Broadcasting," Feb. 1939, WHA Papers, 02-5, Box 81.
12. McCarty, "WHA, Wisconsin's Radio Pioneer."
13. Reynold Wik, "The USDA and the Development of Radio," *Agricultural History* 62 (1988): 178; correspondence, WHA Papers, 02-4, Box 1.
14. Correspondence, WHA Papers, 02-04, Box 1.
15. "Listener Report Form," WHA Papers, 02-4, Box 3.
16. Quoted in Edmund Brunner, *Radio and the Farmer: A Symposium on the Relation of Radio to Rural Life* (New York: Radio Institute, 1935), 20.
17. Paul Glad observes how village newspapers that bemoaned the effects of the automobile and movie theaters on country life praised the radio for keeping the family together at night. See *War, a New Era, and Depression, 1914-1940*, vol. 5 of *The History of Wisconsin* (Madison: State Historical Society of Wisconsin, 1990), 254.
18. *Wisconsin Agriculturist and Farmer*, 2 Oct. 1926; 11 Dec. 1926; 5 Dec. 1925.
19. Correspondence, WHA Papers, 02-4, Box 1.
20. Correspondence, WHA Papers, 02-4, Box 2.
21. Clipping, *Red Granite Times*, 22 Jan. 1937. WHA Papers, Scrapbooks, Box 82.
22. Correspondence, WHA Papers, 02-4, Box 1.
23. Correspondence, WHA Papers, 02-4, Box 2.
24. E. Frost, *Education's Own Stations* (New York: Arno Press and New York Times, 1971) 466.
25. Broadcast schedules, 1927, 1928, WHA Papers, 02-4, Box 81.
26. Clipping, *Beaver Dam Citizen*, 16 Dec. 1927, in WHA Papers, Scrapbook; agricultural radio schedule, Feb. 1928 and May 1928, WHA Papers, 02-5, Box 81.
27. Correspondence, WHA Papers, 02-4, Box 2.
28. I borrow the term "radio imaginary" from Michele Hilmes, *Radio Voices: American Broadcasting, 1922-1952* (Minneapolis: U of Minnesota P, 1997).
29. Correspondence, WHA Papers, 02-4, Box 1.

30. Correspondence, n.d. (1927), WHA Papers, 02-4, Box 3.
 31. Clipping, 12 Jan. 1927, WHA Papers, 02-5, Scrapbooks.
 32. Correspondence, WHA Papers, 02-4, Box 2.
 33. Correspondence, 31 Dec. 1928, WHA Papers, 02-4, Box 2.
 34. Ibid.
 35. Correspondence, n.d. and 28 June 1933, WHA Papers, 02-5, Box 32.
 36. Correspondence, 17 Jan. 1932, WHA Papers, 02-5, Box 32.
 37. Correspondence, 20 Mar. 1927, WHA Papers, 02-4, Box 2.
 38. "To the Farm by Radio" *The Farmer's Wife*. Dec. 1925: 490.
 39. Ibid., 502.
 40. WHA preceded both NBC and CBS in creating such a format in the Midwest.
 41. Correspondence, 26 Jan. 1928, 21 Feb. 1930, WHA Papers, 02-4, Box 2.
 42. Statistics on mailing list in "First Annual Report of Committee on Radio Broadcasting, February, 1939," WHA Papers, 02-5, Box 81.
 43. Correspondence, 26 Jan. 1928, WHA Papers, 02-4, Box 2.
 44. *Broadcast Advertising*, Sept. 1930: 5, 18.
 45. *Homemaker's Hour* radio program schedules, 1932-33, WHA Papers, 02-5, Box 32.
 46. Correspondence, 16 Jan. 1928, 18 Jan. 1928, WHA Papers, 02-4, Box 2.
 47. "First Annual Report of the Committee on Radio Broadcasting," 3.
 48. Frost, 464-74.
 49. Henry A. Wallace, "Standards of Economic Efficiency in Agriculture and Their Compatibility with Social Welfare," *Farm Income and Farm Life: A Symposium of the Social and Economic Factors in Rural Progress*, ed. Dwight Sanderson (New York: American Country Life Association, 1927) 116-17.
 50. See William Bowers, *The Country Life Movement in America 1900-1920* (Port Washington: Kennikat, 1974). 101.

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CHAPTER 5
VOX POP
Network Radio and the Voice of the People

Jason Loviglio

You've been asking for something different in radio, and here it is . . . an unrehearsed program that gives you a cross section of what the average person really knows—and what he thinks about.

*—First network broadcast of Vox Pop,
from Columbus Circle in New York, 7 July 1935*

Introduction

BY 1935 MILLIONS OF AMERICAN RADIO LISTENERS did seem to be responding to "something different in radio." All across the dial, the untutored voices of average people could be heard matching wits on quiz shows, warbling popular tunes for *Major Bowes' Original Amateur Hour*, and piping up from the audience at public forum programs such as *America's Town Meeting of the Air*. As the networks consolidated their dominance over the airwaves and as professional broadcasters—crooners, comedians, commentators, politicians, and pitchmen—mastered forms of address suited to radio's curious blend of interpersonal and mass communication, radio listeners turned to the sound of voices very much like their own.

The popularity and commercial success of audience participation programs during the network era reveals, more clearly than in any other format, the self-consciousness with which network radio and its new mass audience came to think about the role that radio should play in national life. By turning the microphone onto members of the listening audience, these programs made this new national