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"Serving sinners, comforting saints and increasing faith": the Reverend Edythe Stirlen's imagined radio church community

Arlecia Deandra Simmons
University of Iowa

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“SERVING SINNERS, COMFORTING SAINTS
AND INCREASING FAITH”:
THE REVEREND EDYTHE STIRLEN’S
IMAGINED RADIO CHURCH COMMUNITY

by

Arlecia Deandra Simmons

An Abstract

Of a thesis submitted in partial fulfillment of the
requirements for the Doctor of Philosophy degree
in Mass Communications in the Graduate College of
The University of Iowa

December 2009

Thesis Supervisor: Professor Dan Berkowitz

ABSTRACT

In the early 1920s, commercial radio presented many possibilities, including the nationalization of the listening audience, professional opportunities for women, the ability for ministers to spread the gospel, and access to the world for geographically isolated listeners. The media ministry of the Rev. Edythe Elem Swartz Stirlen operated outside the confines of a brick-and-mortar church and created an imagined religious community of congregants. Through the Shenandoah, Iowa, based *Radio Church of the Air* program, *the Send Out Sunshine* magazine, and the Send Out Sunshine Clubs, Stirlen and her virtual parishioners created images of communion they interpreted and used to maintain their community. This project examines the cultural work and the community-building function of early American radio.

Abstract Approved: _____

Thesis Supervisor

Title and Department

Date

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Graduate College
The University of Iowa
Iowa City, Iowa

CERTIFICATE OF APPROVAL

PH.D. THESIS

This is to certify that the Ph.D. thesis of

Arlecia Deandra Simmons

has been approved by the Examining Committee for the
thesis requirement for the Doctor of Philosophy degree in
Mass Communications at the December 2009 graduation.

Thesis Committee:

Daniel Berkowitz, Thesis Supervisor

Venise Berry

Steve Berry

Frank Durham

Joy Hayes

To the called women whose sermons remained in their hearts

Dear Readers:

If you're interested in my religious broadcasts I beseech all of you to show your interest. Each one of my programs is just the work of a department of the KMA Radio Church. To keep church doors open one must *attend*, one must *help*. To keep the Radio Church doors open one must write, one must *help*. To keep the Radio Church doors open one must write, one must *help*. The letters for every day are counted. Radio Stations judge the importance of a program as well as by the responses. If the church would support its programs as well as the world does its programs, we'd take the world for Jesus in this generation.

The Little Minister
Send Out Sunshine Signal
January 1940

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I would like to thank my parents and immediate family members for not extinguishing the flame within me. Throughout life, they protected me from the winds and other forces that wanted to snuff out that burning desire to achieve and dream big. Even when they did not understand what I was doing, they continued to pray for and with me. My Aunt Valerie's miscellaneous boxes containing everything from fortune cookies to bags of field peas were always a welcomed treat. The boxes often contained obituaries, programs or trinkets from family activities, and an assortment of goodies that always provided a good laugh. I cannot say enough about my extended family members and friends who sent gift cards, checks, ministry CDs, and just good vibes.

I would like to thank Professor Carolyn Dyer who helped me discover the Rev. Edythe Stirlen and reignited my love of journalism history. Her guidance and feedback throughout the life of this project were invaluable. Words cannot express my appreciation for the faculty members who worked to see this project to fruition. Professor Daniel Berkowitz and Associate Professor Venise Berry took my hand and reminded me that my destination was in sight. "Why should I care?" is one of Professor Berkowitz's questions

that I will forever remember as I consider the purpose of future research and journalistic projects. Ironically, Dan Berkowitz was the professor who picked me up from the airport when I visited Iowa to check the program out, and in the end, he helped me depart.

Special thanks to Associate Professors Joy Hayes and Frank Durham, who took an early interest in this project and whose classes helped to shape its framework. Associate Professor Stephen Berry joined the committee near the end of the project, but throughout my time at Iowa has been encouraging and concerned about my job search. I would also like to thank UI Associate Professor of History Leslie Schwalm who allowed me to do an independent study during the academic school year.

I am forever grateful for the emotional support of friends, relatives, and sorority sisters. Special thanks to Pastor Sylvia Boyer, the Rev. Orlando Dial, and their Iowa City congregations for their social and spiritual support.

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encouraging and helpful as well as staffers at the UI Libraries Main Interlibrary Loan. I cannot say enough about Sallie Brownlee of the Greater Shenandoah Historical Society and Museum, who provided me unlimited access to the organization's records. Sallie also helped me sift through files, introduced me to interview subjects, and even opened the facility when after hours. The staffs of the Shenandoah Public Library, Disciples of Christ Historical Society in Nashville, Tennessee, and the Herbert Hoover Presidential Library in West Branch, Iowa, also provided invaluable assistance.

Nadine and Darrell Dreagers of the National Radio Heritage Association in Council Bluffs, Iowa, shared documents and took time out of their busy lives to locate audio and video from the Golden Age of Radio Reunions that Stirlen attended.

A prayer was answered when Stirlen's grandchildren, family friends, and co-workers responded to my request for one-on-one meetings. Granddaughter Suzanne Boyde met with me, invited me into her home to access family documents, and took me to visit her grandmother's gravesite and former residences. Her sister Cynthia Samuel also shared memories of their grandmother during breakfast and subsequent phone calls. Granddaughter Martha Wells of South Dakota shared personal correspondence and spent hours reading letters shared between her mother and grandmother to identify those that contained information about the radio program.

The grandson of Earl May, Edward May, Jr. of Omaha, Nebraska, talked with me about his grandfather and directed me to other resources. Radio homemaker biographer Evelyn Birkby patiently answered additional questions about the women in Shenandoah radio. Thomas E. Beavers, a KMA employee and member of the First Christian Church, answered questions about the station and Stirlen's time there. Janese Wagoner of

Clarinda, Iowa, provided enthusiasm and several names for potential sources. Mrs. Benetta Guilford, a longtime Shenandoah resident who attended church with Stirlen, called the local newspaper to locate me so she could share information about her relationship with the Stirlen family. Members and officers of the First Christian Church in Shenandoah were also gracious as they shared their memories of Stirlen during morning worship service and the coffee hours that followed.

Appreciation is also extended to Tess Gruber Nelson and the *Shenandoah Valley News Today* newspaper for reporting on my project, which alerted local residents of my arrival in town and my interest in artifacts and interviews.

I have probably forgotten to thank someone, but I would be remiss if I did not pay homage to my ancestors. I am a descendant of Gullah people who shucked oysters on St. Helena Island, South Carolina. I believe that as they worked, they dreamed and prayed that their children would have brighter futures. I am the recipient of answered prayers, and for that, I am grateful.

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PREFACE

When I arrived in Iowa to attend graduate school in 2005, I was saddened to learn that the University Apartments where I lived did not subscribe to TBN or any of the other Christian broadcasting networks offered by the local cable system. This was problematic, but I did not lose faith in reconnecting with the televangelists I had come to know and love. I soon discovered the Internet offered similar programming.

During the first semester of my doctoral program in Iowa, I enrolled in Professor Jane Singer's *Media and Change* class where I began exploring the intersection of media and religion. In October 2005, I began to examine the media convergence efforts of two American megachurch pastors, Bishop T.D. Jakes and Joel Osteen. I wanted to know how the televangelists and their congregations used the Internet, a new medium of mass communication, in conjunction with the older medium of television. Jakes and Osteen broadcast their programs weekly on network as well as cable television and they were using the Internet to "converge" or connect their brick-and-mortar ministries with their television broadcasts, CD and DVD sales, and published books.

In the spring of 2006 in Professor Carolyn Dyer's media history seminar, I discovered Rev. Edythe Stirlen and her radio broadcast during a visit to the Iowa Women's Archives, which is located in the University of Iowa Main Library. Prior to the visit, Professor Dyer informed Curator Karen Mason of each student's research interests. Mason pulled a box from the Edythe Stirlen Papers, a collection of a Shenandoah, Iowa-based religious broadcaster who died in 1987. Stirlen, a native of Kansas, first appeared on radio in 1926 while visiting station KFEQ in St. Joseph, Missouri, with her church.

Her religious program aired for more than 50 years on KFNF and KMA, two popular farmer stations in Shenandoah, Iowa.

The box Mason pulled for me to review contained issues of the *Send Out Sunshine (S.O.S.) Signal*, a magazine that Stirlen edited, published, and distributed to listeners of her *Radio Church of the Air*. I gently flipped through the magazine and quickly noticed that what Stirlen did with the magazine was similar to what Jakes and Osteen were doing with the Internet. Stirlen left a vast collection of “unfiltered evidence,” which will be discussed in more detail in the sources and methods section.¹ I returned the next day to learn more about the collection. What was new in a sense was this amazing collection of a broadcaster, is rarity since many of the records and relics attached to early broadcasters and radio stations have been disposed of. For example, many of the records of KMA that I requested from the station were no longer available. According to a longtime employee, the station files were purged a few years prior per the order of a former station manager.² Current management and Earl May’s grandson directed me to a commissioned biography, which became a significant secondary source.³

When the semester ended, I returned to the archives to begin the immersion process. I sifted through the 16 boxes included in the Edythe Stirlen collection, which for three years enabled me to study the intersection of media and religion during a different time and place. It was clear at the start that Stirlen’s collection not only document her contribution to radio but also the engagement of her audience.

¹ Louise M. Benjamin, “Historical Evidence: Facts, Proof and Probability,” in *Methods of Historical Analysis in Electronic Media* (Mahwah, NJ: Lawrence Erlbaum Associates, 2006), 27.

² Thomas E. Beavers, interview by author, Shenandoah, IA, June 1, 2007.

³ Mark Eno (KMA General Manager), e-mail messages to author, August 07, 2007, and July 18, 2008; Ed May Jr. (grandson of KMA founder Earl May), in discussion with the author, October 1, 2007.

After reading years of sermons, prayers, and the magazine published by Stirlen, I also wanted to become a member of that community. I remembered, however, that I had to keep some distance as a scholar. The boundary, which was necessary to establish, did not prevent me from exploring the same faith and values that I held with those Stirlen had preached about for nearly 60 years. I was a Christian when I found Stirlen's collection and my faith was both tested and strengthened as I pursued my doctoral studies and immersed myself in this dissertation.

The following pages are the fruits of my labor, cultivated during four grueling winters, a devastating tornado that made national news, and a historical flood. However, this project was harvested in Durham, North Carolina, during my first semester at Duke University Divinity School. In researching Stirlen's life, I began to confront my own apprehensions and fears about being a woman pursuing a life in ministry. My call to ministry existed prior to entering the doors of Iowa, yet I chose to further my studies in my secular vocation. For Moses, God used a burning bush to communicate his destiny. For me, God used His still small voice and the inspiration from Stirlen's journey to place me in alignment with His assignment.

CHAPTER 1

INTRODUCTION

My interest in religious broadcasting began at an early age. I grew up in Charleston, South Carolina, nicknamed the Holy City, where my formative years were spent at home with my maternal grandmother who faithfully engaged with religious broadcasting. In the morning, we tuned into WPAL, a black-owned AM station, where we listened to the program of the Rev. Carole B. Priester. An ordained minister in the African Methodist Episcopal Church and the first woman to pastor an A.M.E. church in South Carolina, Rev. Priester offered prayers, inspirational words, and told listeners how the songs played held messages that could strengthen their faith and trust in God. She was in no rush as she enunciated each word with a voice that could have easily been confused with that of a blues singer. She concluded each broadcast with the words, “God loves you and so do I.”

After listening to the radio in my grandparent’s bedroom, we headed to our dining room that transformed into a mini-sanctuary where we worshipped while watching Jim and Tammy Faye Bakker on the *Praise the Lord (PTL) Club* television program. We sang and clapped during the hour, which featured Tammy crying and Jim preaching about the good news while encouraging viewers to contribute financially to the work of their ministry. Like other viewers, my grandmother answered the call by mailing in “love gifts” or financial contributions. When our New Hope Missionary Baptist Church family traveled to Carowinds, a theme park located on the border of North and South Carolinas, my grandmother Louise Simmons and the senior adults took a side trip to Heritage U.S.A., the 2,300-acre Christian theme park built by the Bakkers. I would not get to visit

with Jim and Tammy that day, and would subsequently miss our daily worship services after starting kindergarten.

As an adult, my interest in what religious broadcaster Ben Armstrong labeled “the electric church,” grew as I attempted to walk out my faith beyond the Sunday morning experience.⁴ Daily, I tuned into the Trinity Broadcast Network (TBN), the world’s largest Christian television network founded in 1973 by Paul and Jan Crouch with the help of the Bakkers, who left to start the PTL Club.⁵

I also worshipped daily via www.tbn.org or www.streamingfaith.com, where I accessed the ministries of preachers and churches around the country. My engagement with religious broadcasting was deep, so when I discovered the gems within the Edythe Stirlen collection I immediately asked: “Is what’s old really new again when it comes to converged media efforts of contemporary religious broadcasters?”

Like their radio predecessors, contemporary ministers use television and the Internet to create virtual congregations that not only listen to preaching, but also request prayer, contribute tithes and offerings, and stay engaged with the congregation via various interactive features of the World Wide Web. This phenomenon, however, is not a new one.

This project sought to explore the converged ministry efforts of the Rev. Edythe Elem Swartz Stirlen and her audience who envisioned themselves as an imagined religious community. This study examines the producer and consumers of religious programming on the Midwestern farmer stations as they navigated through the evolution of regulation and network radio. Their story helps document the contributions of not only

⁴ See Ben Armstrong, *The Electric Church* (Nashville: Thomas Nelson, 1979).

⁵ About Us: The TBN Story. <http://tbn.org/index.php/3/18.html> Accessed May 20, 2009.

a lone broadcaster, but also the undocumented contributions to the cultural history of independent broadcasting.

Shenandoah Grown

Rural independent stations like KFNF and KMA, also considered farmer stations, grew their own brand of entertainers who used interpretive strategies to manage and maintain their segment of the listening audience and who, in turn, grew audiences that evolved into imagined communities. The Rev. Edythe Elem Swartz Stirlen broadcasted on both stations in Shenandoah, Iowa, and established a virtual congregation through her *Radio Church of the Air* broadcast. Stirlen's listeners, many of whom were shut-ins unable to leave their rural homes, envisioned Stirlen as their spiritual leader and she envisioned them as her congregants within this virtual church environment.

Subsequently, Stirlen, the listeners of her radio program, and the readers of her magazine formed an imagined religious community although there was no physical church or lone geographic location where they united for worship. Thus, what takes place substantiates the validity of Armstrong's notion of an electric church, which other scholars have challenged. Religious media historian Quentin J. Schultze, who has studied how evangelicals and fundamentalists use media as well as the business of televangelism, contended "the phrase electronic church is an oxymoron, since a congregation meets face-to-face for worship, study, mutual edification, and fellowship."⁶ The Stirlen case suggests face-to-face interaction was not needed for the community or virtual congregation to operate effectively as an electric church.

⁶ Quentin J. Schultze, *Televangelism and American Culture The Business of Popular Religion* (Baker Book House: Grand Rapids, Michigan, 1991), 29.

I contend that as Stirlen's listeners tuned into her radio program and read the magazine attached to that radio program, they began to view themselves as one listening community and as the congregation she called the *Radio Church of the Air*. From the very beginning of her radio work, Stirlen intended for audience members to view themselves as more than listeners. For Stirlen, the radio program equated to ministry and she wanted her listeners to join in as congregants and missionaries.

Cultural Historian Michele Hilmes contended Anderson's concept of imagined community corresponds with the experience of radio, which allowed thousands of listeners from all across the United States to tune into and share similar experiences as they listened to the antics of characters such as *Amos and Andy*.⁷ "Radio, more than any other agency, possessed the power not only to assert actively the unifying power of simultaneous experience but to communicate meanings about the nature of that unifying experience."⁸ Thus, early and modern radio listeners demonstrated the same characteristics of the imagined community purposed by Anderson as he discussed nationhood.

Independent broadcasters have rarely left documents such as those found within the Stirlen collection; thus, this case study is enhanced by the rich data that allows me to examine the images of communion constructed by Stirlen and her community. I argue that although they could not physically bow to pray at the altar or sit in the pews of a brick-and-mortar church, they imagined their presence, if only for 15 minutes, in a sacramental space where they could hear the word of God and refresh their spirits and souls. The service provided by Stirlen's *Radio Church of the Air* helped her audience

⁷ Hilmes, *Radio Voices*, 11.

⁸ Ibid.

members to envision themselves not as simply passive listeners of a radio broadcast but as an imagined community, a congregation of sorts.

For broadcasters like Stirlen and self-made radio owners in Shenandoah, the mandate of the “public interest, convenience, and necessity,” which was instituted with the Federal Radio Act of 1927, had a different meaning than what government officials envisioned. In his 1956 dissertation on the development of AM radio in Iowa, Ernest F. Andrews Jr., discussed the Send out Sunshine clubs, a component of Stirlen’s ministry, as simply a way KMA promoted their station.⁹ However, I contend that Stirlen offered much more, which is also substantiated by the document Andrews cites. In 1941, KMA petitioned the Federal Communications Commission to renew the station’s license without a hearing.¹⁰ Within that petition, Stirlen is noted as hosting the Send Out Sunshine club and for specific acts, such as finding homes for 200 children and helping adults find employment.¹¹ This study seeks to account for the act of communion, which wasn’t as measurable or easy to document on a form.

The imagined community of Stirlen’s *Radio Church of the Air*, however, did not evolve in isolation. Rather, listeners developed their community identity in the midst of an industry that grew from the interests of hobbyists to a commodity molded by the hands of major corporations. This study will also examine the implications of the regulatory matters that served as the backdrop of this imagined community. Subsequently, some of the decisions that redefined radio impacted Stirlen’s community, as her programs time

⁹ Ernest F. Andrews Jr., “The Development of Amplitude Modulation Radio Broadcasting Stations in Iowa: A Selective History” (PhD diss., University of Iowa, 1956), 275-312.

¹⁰ Ibid., 292.

¹¹ Ibid.

was minimized and the aid society had to redirect its missional efforts in an effort to focus on keeping the radio program on the air as radio time became an expensive commodity.

The primary questions guiding this study, which uses the case of Stirlen and her radio audience, lead to a new understanding of the cultural and social contributions of religious broadcasting and the role of women in religious broadcasting. Three primary questions guide this dissertation: (1) What were the “images of communion” created by Stirlen and audience members for the construction of the imagined religious community known as the *Radio Church of the Air*? (2) How were these “images of communion” interpreted for the construction and maintenance of the community? (3) How did the *Radio Church of the Air* satisfy the public interest of its imagined community?

How the Study Will Proceed

This chapter serves as the introduction for the project and provides my reasons for exploring the study. Chapter Two traces the cultural as well as political contexts in which radio evolved as a commercial medium, and examines how the Shenandoah farmer stations dealt with the blows of regulation, reallocation, and challenges to direct selling. Chapter Three lays out the lenses of analyses used for this study and outlines how the conceptual frameworks of imagined community and interpretive community were used to analyze how Stirlen created and maintained the imagined radio church community. Chapter Four looks at the personality and station profiles of Henry Field and Earl May, who were instrumental in constructing the larger imagined community in which Stirlen’s community operated. Chapter Five looks at the environment of Stirlen’s *Radio Church of the Air* that leads to understanding of local radio and its impact on its physical and

imagined communities. Chapter Six examines the evolution of Stirlen's radio broadcast while analyzing the content of the simultaneity of experience, which is a requirement of an imagined community, for the *Radio Church of the Air* listeners. Chapter Seven evaluates the work of the *Send out Signal Magazine* and its role in presenting the "images of communion," which were then interpreted by community members enabling them to imagine themselves as members of the *Radio Church of the Air*. Chapter Eight interrogates the interpretive and physical work of the Send Out Sunshine Clubs and how the outreach groups contributed to the community's maintenance. Chapter Nine draws conclusions and recommends future directions for the cultural history study of media.

CHAPTER 2

THE HISTORICAL BACKDROP

As the United States fought a war abroad and her citizens fought to survive on the domestic front, a new mass medium arrived that united a nation and established a mass audience. Media scholar Susan J. Douglas in her influential 1999 cultural history of radio, *Listening In: Radio and the American Imagination*, contended, “Radio is arguably the most important electronic invention of the century.”¹² Douglas contends that in the first half of the twentieth century, the medium helped Americans imagine themselves and their relationships to others in the nation.¹³

Through the lens of radio, the cultural history of the interwar years come into focus by allowing us to examine various genres of programming of the 1930s and how they helped the nation contend with the anxieties and social tensions of the period. The Great Depression, which is often studied as a period of crisis and transition, is noted as the key transformational moment in broadcasting history.¹⁴ In this period, radio not only served as a nation-building medium, but also established commercial markets for advertising, promoted propaganda, and served the public. Moreover, radio comedies helped the country laugh to keep from crying in the midst of an economic crisis at home and unrest abroad as the nation recovered from one war and proceeded into another.

For some listeners, radio provided entertainment as well as a way to engage with political discussions uncommon within their local public spheres. Most notably,

¹² Susan J. Douglas, *Listening In: Radio and the American imagination* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1999), 9.

¹³ *Ibid.*, 10.

¹⁴ Kate Lacey, “Radio in the Great Depression: Promotional Culture, Public Service, and Propaganda.” in *The Radio Reader: Essays in the Cultural History of Radio*, ed. Michele Hilmes and Jason Loviglio (London: Routledge, 2002), 21-40.

Americans were offered a portrait of the nation's condition through President Franklin D. Roosevelt's radio speeches known as Fireside Chats. Radio's wide adoption and popularity had the effect Roosevelt desired and offered Americans options they had never known. For other listeners, the medium became a way to connect with religion and spirituality, which previously was only accessed in churches or through interpersonal communication. An early commentator on religion and radio, Spencer Miller, Jr., concluded that radio came along when people were attempting to recapture "the lost radiance of religious experience."¹⁵ Radio, however, provided Americans with various cultural, political, social, and religious experiences that no other medium had previously had the power to grant.

This chapter investigates the cultural as well as political contexts in which the Rev. Edythe Stirlen's radio career and imagined religious community developed. Specifically, this chapter examines how station owners Henry Field and Earl May forged ahead with developing their homegrown programming while navigating the politics of radio, including repeated wavelength reallocations and restrictions on direct selling via the airwaves.

There are several reasons for the limited scholarship on various aspects of broadcasting, including the lack of available resources to study local or more regionally known stations."¹⁶ Hilmes, whose own research has depended heavily on the records of

¹⁵ Spencer Miller, "Radio and Religion," *Annals of the American Academy of Political and Social Science*, (January 1935): 136.

¹⁶ Michele Hilmes, *Radio Voices: American Broadcasting, 1922-1952* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1997), xvi.

NBC, contends that the on air sounds and stories that could be studied were often unrecorded and unscripted and no artifacts have been left behind.¹⁷

The artifacts that remain, she notes, must be “pieced together out of scripts, press accounts, and reminiscences.”¹⁸ Additionally, what remains for examination often privileges networks like NBC, which scholars like Hilmes have been able to study because of the availability of their records or entities whose artifacts are stored in a centralized location.

Transformation of American Culture

Warren Susman, who studied American culture of the 1930s, suggests that it is necessary to study this period through the lens of the “culture of abundance,” which begins with the “cultural consequences of the new communications.” Technology not only provided an avenue for people to become consumers or participate in abundance, but also altered the “consciousness” of the nation as time and space shifted. Through exposure to site and sound, Americans became increasingly self-aware of their culture.

Although radio was not a new communication tool, commercial radio as a mass medium created both a national and international audience thus, shaping the culture in a way that had not previously been established by a medium.¹⁹ From the airing of the big bands, the voices of Amos and Andy, and the impact of President Franklin Roosevelt’s Fireside Chats, there were new consequences for the American people whose lives were now exposed to cultural forms and people who were not physically near but within their imagined communities.

¹⁷ Ibid.

¹⁸ Ibid.

¹⁹ Susman, *Culture as History*, 84.

Through Roosevelt's broadcasted talks to the American public, he was able to engineer a Presidency that fostered a "new kind of political and social power" because of how he used the new medium.²⁰ For example, President Roosevelt wanted Americans to feel they mattered and that the Administration was concerned about their individual needs. Through the new medium and the development of the networks, Americans united and shared common experiences, be it hunger, war, dustbowls, or the call for governmental reform.

Radio Connects a Nation

Early radio was a reflection of the cultural, societal, and political shifts taking place in the United States at the start of the twentieth century. Personalities such as Will Rogers and programs such as *The Goldbergs*, *The Jack Benny Show*, and *Amos and Andy* introduced Americans to new public spheres while virtually taking listeners into new communities and homes. Through radio, the new immigrant learned how to be an American by hearing the native language as well as the country's expectations for new inhabitants.²¹ Radio united a nation that had previously been isolated by geographic boundaries and segregated by language differences.²² Radio had nationalizing power and the cultural work it performed could not be dismissed, ignored, nor could it overshadow the political maneuvering taking place in the background.

Shows such as *The Jack Benny Show* revealed a great deal about mainstream culture and represented the anxieties present during the Depression. Even as the mass

²⁰ Susman, *Culture as History*, 159.

²¹ Hilmes, *Only Connect: A Cultural History of Broadcasting in the United States*, 55.

²² *Ibid.*, 55.

medium helped change lives, communities, and the world at large, the broadcast industry within the United States did not come to full adulthood without growing pains. Though radio historian Susan J. Douglas dubbed radio “arguably the most important electronic invention of the century,” as an industry, it must also be analyzed as one of the most challenging to regulate.

The Chaotic Medium

Radio and broadcasting were not initially synonymous, as amateur or ham operators took radio and helped it develop into commercial broadcasting by advancing the technology and creating its audience.²³ Initially, the government established its regulatory role with the passage of the Radio Act of 1912, which allowed the Department of Commerce to issue licenses for interstate and foreign radio transmissions. When the Radio Act of 1912 was created, Congress had little prophetic vision for the future of the medium. The flexibility of the Act allowed anyone to apply for a license to broadcast across the ether. Noted broadcast historian Erik Barnouw suggested that even before radio had fully gotten off the ground, technology for television was quickly emerging, yet the 1912 legislation that was the law of the land until 1927 was unprepared for either.²⁴

It was not long before amateur broadcasters sought licenses to take advantage of the burgeoning medium that had an economic viability not initially envisioned for post-World War I radio. Radio quickly developed, not only because of technological advances but also because of the cultural shifts within society. As a product of the Jazz Age, radio developed because of the faddest culture that was then emerging because of American

²³ See Daniel J. Czitrom, *Media and the American Mind* (Chapel Hill, NC: University of North Carolina, 1982).

²⁴ Erik Barnouw. *A Tower in Babel: The History of Broadcasting in the United States to 1933* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1966).

flappers, miniature golf, spectator sports, and celebrity faith healers travelling the country.²⁵ Consequently, Americans embraced and established credit that evolved them into consumers. As radio became important to people's everyday lives and the commercial network system developed, the government soon realized that what it had once controlled and used for militaristic purposes was now a medium that could not simply be left unmonitored by government. New voices could now be heard, but too many voices forced others into silence. Thus, commercial radio not only needed programming but also regulation.

Following the initial broadcast of the nation's first radio station, KDKA, hundreds of broadcasters petitioned the Department of Commerce for permission to broadcast. By the end of 1920, the agency had already issued 570.²⁶ With few requirements to meet and a law that did not allow the denial of a request, furniture stores, feed-store owners, churches, and people with just a dose of curiosity applied for licenses to take advantage of the new mass communication device. Secretary of Commerce Herbert Hoover quickly found his office issuing licenses as well as assigning frequencies, which were limited, and defining hours of operations. Although these duties were necessary to control an industry growing increasingly out of bounds each day, the Department of Commerce was not legally authorized to undertake the aforementioned duties, as the Radio Act of 1912 did not sanction the regulatory efforts.

²⁵ Fred J. MacDonald, *Don't Touch that Dial: Radio Programming in American Life, 1920-1960* (Chicago: Nelson-Hall, 1979)

²⁶ Czitrom, *Media and the American Mind*, 71.

Conferences Held To Dissect Problems

With numerous concerns and publics to entertain, Hoover held four radio conferences, the first at the request of U.S. President Warren G. Harding, to seek input from amateurs, emerging industry leaders, the public, and radio companies on how to control the developing medium. By the first conference in 1922, the technical, economical, legislative, and ideological elements for America broadcasting were in place.²⁷ It was now up to Secretary of Commerce Hoover to figure out how the various facets could unite in an effort to calm what had become known as a chaotic medium. Held in Washington, D.C., the conferences grew from 30 conferees to 500 participants who made recommendations to Congress on what stations should be licensed, frequency assignments, how radio would and could be financed, who should or should not be able to broadcast, and what would be allowed on the airwaves. “It is inconceivable that we should allow so great a possibility of service, for news, for entertainment, for education, and for vital commercial purposes, to be drowned in advertising chatter, or for commercial purposes that can be quite well served by our other great means of communication,” said Hoover during his opening address to the first conference on February 27, 1922.²⁸ Broadcast historian Louise Benjamin explains that radio benefited from the relationship built between governmental departments, station owners, and radio manufacturers, whose cooperation was witnessed during the four radio conferences.²⁹

²⁷ Susan J. Douglas, *Inventing American Broadcasting, 1899-1922* (Baltimore: John Hopkins University Press, 1987), 317.

²⁸ Marvin R. Bensman, *The Beginning of Broadcast Regulation in the Twentieth Century* (Jefferson, NC: McFarland & Co., 2000), 51.

²⁹ Louise Benjamin, *Free of the Air and the Public Interest; First Amendment Rights in Broadcasting to 1935* (Carbondale, IL: Southern Illinois University Press, 2001), 6.

Paying for the Music

In 1923, the American Society of Composers, Authors, and Publishers (ASCAP), was formed by a group of conference attendees who united to protect their copyright interests. In response to their claims, the National Association of Broadcasters organized to devise a payment agreement to keep music on the airwaves.³⁰ Since the beginning, music was an essential part of programming, which had to evolve as members of the music industry and broadcasters sought to control the portion of the industry that they could self-regulate without government intervention. The self-regulation of the industry continued as the government realized the strength of both legislation and self-imposed rules. In an effort to curb interference and provide some kind of stability to the airwaves, on the advice of conference attendees, Hoover proceeded with a spectrum reallocation plan. In 1923 Hoover divided radio stations into three classes labeled A, B, and C, designated by bands of power as high, medium, and low.

Henry Field and Earl May founded their stations in 1924 and 1925, respectively. KFNF and KMA were assigned Class B designations and were expected to maintain equipment and offer quality programming of service to the public.³¹ The two farmer station owners did not sit passively by as the industry evolved; rather, they were involved with regulatory matters and any other discussions that directly affected them. Although their stations were influential in the Midwest, the fact that Secretary of Commerce Hoover was an Iowa native did not hinder the ability to connect with those in Washington.

³⁰ Douglas, *Inventing American Broadcasting*, 72.

³¹ Benjamin, *Free of the Air and the Public Interest*, 16.

Wave Jumping, Time Sharing, and Reallocations

Publications produced by both stations and news reports of the period report that the Shenandoah farmer-station owners and their teams had loads of fun and experienced great moments broadcasting on the new medium. However, maneuvering through the existing and pending rules of the industry was no laughing matter. The two station owners often solicited the help of lawyers to challenge rulings that threatened the strength of their signals as well as their ability to sell their wares and agricultural products via radio.

During the early days of KFNF, listeners as far as 200 miles in each direction heard the station because of its reach.³² “We had the darndest rig you ever saw. But it worked. And the the rules weren’t so strict then. On a good clear night we would pour on kilowatts and really tear a hole across the midwest,” recalled Field during a 1948 *Des Moines Register* interview.³³

One of the major issues confronting the farmer stations was the allocation of signals. After the Commission was formed in 1941, the station owners and their listeners, who became their constituents and key proponents, levied criticism against the Commission for the injustices rural broadcasters were experiencing. The smaller, independent stations did not have the same governmental favor as the clear channel stations (which will be discussed later) and those affiliated with the networks.

Radio listeners and owners often used local as well as national daily newspapers to debate the actions taking place in Washington regarding local radio. “Where is [Henry]

³² Julian Colby, “Radio Sunday School Just 22 Years Old,” *Des Moines Register*, Jan. 5, 1947.

³³ Louis Cook Jr., “Henry Field- Successful Back Fence Philosopher,” June 6, 1948.

Bellows, our Minnesota man, as a representative? Has he also forgot his home people or has he joined the Coolidge gang as a promise for a bigger job? Just leave the stations as they are. They should be put up higher than lower.”³⁴ However, not all writers summoned by Field opposed the government’s pending restrictions on the farmer stations. H.J. Drewry, treasurer of the W.J. Dixon Lumber Co., told the Commission he agreed with restricting the reach of the farmer stations, as their programs were “mostly advertising anyway” and they interfered with the concerts of New York’s WJZ.³⁵ A writer reporting on the matter for the *New York Times* in May 1927 labeled the campaign “record-breaking propaganda,” and reported the Commission was not being influenced by Field’s tactics.³⁶

A week later, the *Times* reported that in an effort to “end chaos in the air,” the wavelengths of 694 stations would be reallocated, two of which were KFNF and KMA. They were two of ten stations moved from 1,110 kilocycles to 270.1 meters. The Commission, created under the Radio Act of 1927, had for the first time attempted to calm the chaos by issuing new 60-day licenses that separated the signals of stations in large cities by 50 kilocycles while separating others by 10 kilocycles. “[T]his experiment being resolved upon in the hope that it will obviate much of the heterodyning and other interferences with reception of radio stations.”³⁷

By August 1927, Henry Field petitioned the Commission to restore KFNF’s frequency, citing he lost 80 percent of his business when the station’s frequency was

³⁴ “Iowa Radio Fans Pour Protests On Capital,” *New York Times*, May 17, 1927.

³⁵ Ibid.

³⁶ Ibid.

³⁷ “64 Radio Stations Get Reallocations,” *New York Times*, May 27, 1927.

changed months earlier.³⁸ When the government would not provide Field additional space or time, Field found other avenues to expand his reach, such as purchasing time from neighboring stations. “When the national radio commission does not allot Henry Field night hours for broadcasting from KFNF, he steps out and purchases a few ‘night hours,’” reported the *Shenandoah Sentinel* on its front-page.³⁹ In January 1928, Field signed a contract with KFEQ in St. Joseph, Missouri, to broadcast three hours each Saturday night via a feed.⁴⁰

Although independent and noncommercial stations thought they were already under attack, more change was on the way with General Order 40, which was a reallocation plan announced in August 1928. The ruling took effect in November, calling for 40 clear channels and 34 regional channels, with the remaining frequencies reserved to lower power channels. Ninety-four percent of broadcasters were impacted by reallocations while the remaining 6 percent consisted of chain-owned or network affiliated stations.⁴¹ Competition to maintain licenses and to get new ones was fierce, and inevitably the move decreased the number of stations as some stations left the air after being allotted only a few hours.⁴² A station’s frequency assignment could also be challenged based on its adherence to the “public interest” mandate, which the Commission vaguely interpreted.⁴³

³⁸ “Federal Radio Commission Studies Problem of Radio Sales Talks, *New York Times*, Aug. 14, 1927.

³⁹ “KFNF Contracts For Night Hours,” *Evening Sentinel*, January 5, 1928, 1.

⁴⁰ Ibid.

⁴¹ McChesney, *Telecommunications*, 25.

⁴² Ibid.

⁴³ Ibid.

In a 1929 letter to KFNF advertisers, Field assured advertisers that the latest spectrum readjustment from 336.9 meters or 890 kilocycles was seen as “a splendid wave.”⁴⁴ Documents suggest the station was being heard “as far as 1000 to 2000 miles away,” and Field guaranteed advertisers they would have access to this expanded coverage and did not have to worry about an increase in rates.⁴⁵

For the Shenandoah farmer stations, reallocation had taken place before. During the early years of KFNF and KMA, the terms of their licenses required them to not only share time with each other but also with other stations, which was a common practice for educational, religious, and small commercial stations. The arrangement between the two Shenandoah stations, however, was not as contentious as other relationships that will be discussed later. “The story of KMA/KFNF was a remarkable tale of cooperation between two competitors. May and Field were both high-profile, intense men, but, the six weeks they shared the same frequency, they decided for good business reasons to put their audience first,” wrote Bob Doll.⁴⁶

For a time, the two stations also shared the same frequency, wave 461, which allowed each station to “broadcast for an hour or two, then go off the air while the other got in some programming.”⁴⁷ For example, the station jointly covered the 1925 World Series since neither station was permitted to be on air for the entire game.⁴⁸

⁴⁴ Henry Field to Gentleman, “KFNF Going Stronger Than Ever,” Box 5, Folder 4, HFC SHSI.

⁴⁵ Ibid.

⁴⁶ Bob Doll, *Sparks out of the Plowed Ground: The History of America's Small Town Radio Stations* (Streamline Publishing, 1996), 10.

⁴⁷ Birkby, *KMA Radio*, 33.

⁴⁸ Doll, *Sparks out of the Plowed Ground*, 10; Jeff Stein, *Making Waves: The People and Places of Iowa Broadcasting*, (Cedar Rapids, IA; WDG Communications, 2004), 7.

Though KFNF and KMA civilly navigated their time-sharing arrangement, other governmentally mandated assignments were not always so amicable. Take, for example, the initial set-up between KMA and KWKH in Shreveport, Louisiana. KWKH's owner W.K. Henderson, "the doggone man of radio," agitated both May and the Federal Radio Commission, as he did not adhere easily to the rules.⁴⁹

Giants Take Over Radioland

As small stations fought to maintain their wave positions and retain their licenses, and independent stations like KFNF and KMA fought to maintain the operations they worked to build, the reach of network-affiliated stations expanded. Essentially, the government allowed the radio giants to take over radioland. According to the *New York Times*, it was not long before the Commission began to "cooperate in the development of high-powered broadcasting stations throughout the country."⁵⁰ For example, stations like New York City's WAAF, which operated at 5,000 watts, were permitted to experiment with super-power transmitters. WAAF, AT&T's flagship station founded in 1923, was allowed to establish a 50,000 watt transmitter at its existing frequency and would do so as long as there was no evidence of "undue interference."⁵¹ The Commission evaluated the character of the programs offered as well as the mechanical equipment before a station could be authorized to operate at an excess of 30,000 watts. Based on its observations, stations using 30,000, 50,000 or 100,000 watts

⁴⁹ "Radio Deans To Hear W.K.'s Plea," *Evening Sentinel*, September 18, 1930, 1. When Henderson recognized his license was in jeopardy he sold the station to investors in September 1932. See Doerksen, *American Babel*, 103.

⁵⁰ "Radio Board Grants WAAF Higher Power," *New York Times*, August 20, 1927, 8.

⁵¹ *Ibid.*

were no more likely to cause interference than those using 5,000.⁵² In essence, only those little aural nuisances operating at 1,000 watts or below troubled the ether.

Shared Problems and Time

WEAF's reach expanded while annoyances like KMA and KWKH divided time on 760 kilocycles, using 1,000 watts of power.⁵³ KMA had previously shared time with the University of Iowa's WSUI, however, the University applied for full-time operation.⁵⁴ By honoring the University's application, KMA received a better wave position, albeit a time-sharing arrangement, with Shreveport, Louisiana's W.K Henderson, which allowed Southerners to hear radio from the heart of the Cornbelt while Midwesterners got a taste of Creole radio sprinkled with Henderson's catchphrases "Hello World!" and "Dog gone it."⁵⁵

Henderson said many disparaging things about KMA before the dust of contention cleared. When asked why he lambasted KMA on the air, Henderson called the situation a misunderstanding, as he had thought KMA was vying for his wavelength.⁵⁶ The Mays and Hendersons eventually became friends and both couples traveled to each other's hometown to broadcast directly to their distant audiences. When the Mays visited Shreveport in January 1928, the two stations jointly promoted a special evening of programming. "That evening, KMA broadcasted from 5 p.m. to 10 p.m. at which time

⁵² Ibid.

⁵³ "Mays Are At Shreveport," *Evening Sentinel*, January 30, 1928, 1; "Radio Board Grants WEAF Higher Power," *New York Times*, August 20, 1927, 8.

⁵⁴ "Radio Board Grants WEAF Higher Power," *New York Times*, August 20, 1927, 8.

⁵⁵ "Shrevesport [*sic*] and KMA Talk Back Forth By Radio," *The Evening Sentinel*, January 31, 1928, 1.

⁵⁶ "'Doggone' Radio Man Does Stuff At KMA Station," *Des Moines Register*, April 4, 1928, 1.

they signed off for a one-hour program broadcast on KWKH. “Telegrams were read and then the two stations talked back and forth,” reported the local paper.⁵⁷ Listeners in Shenandoah listened to the program from the Mayfair Auditorium, KMA’s facility. The Shenandoah *Evening Sentinel* reported on the “conversations” between the stations and commented on the “quaint way that Ms. Henderson has of announcing.”⁵⁸ In April 1928, Henderson and his wife visited with both Shenandoah stations. Henderson, a critic of the Commission, chose to keep silent on the regulatory issues while announcing on KMA because being in Iowa made him “feel in such good humor.”⁵⁹ He even joined in on May’s on-air direct selling. The *Des Moines Register* reported that visitors from Nebraska, Missouri, Kansas, and Iowa crowded into the KMA studio to see and hear Henderson. While in Shenandoah, Henderson also stopped by KFNF to chat on air with Field.⁶⁰

Field and May were not as vocal as Henderson about their opposition to the Commission’s decisions; however, neither were they complacent about the ongoing changes that impacted their stations. Troubled at times with limited wavelengths and time-sharing arrangements, Field and May often took matters into their own hands by dismissing assigned frequency allocation in exchange for self-assigned frequencies that offered little to no interference.⁶¹ The station owners were familiar with Hoover, an Iowan, and the policies of the Federal Radio Commission. However, that did not stop

⁵⁷ Ibid.

⁵⁸ Ibid.

⁵⁹ Ibid.

⁶⁰ Ibid.

⁶¹ Birkby, *KMA Radio*, 33.

Hoover from criticizing the broadcasters he recognized as “air pirates,” a name given to stations that abandoned their assigned frequencies in search of more favorable ones that came with less static and a further reach.⁶² Hoover threatened the “wave length jumpers” that they would lose their licenses if they did not return to their assigned frequencies; however, the Commission, created as an interim organization, had no authority to impose such punishments. The overloaded ether forced stations throughout the land to illegally broadcast off their assigned frequencies, and, while listeners were able to hear entertainment and music from distant lands, this was against the government’s wishes.

In the fall of 1930, a radio “traffic cop” went on duty in Grand Island, Nebraska, to monitor stations that were suspected of “violating the technical regulations of the Federal Radio Commission, and thereby causing radio interference.”⁶³ The monitor checked “operations of stations over the entire radio spectrum” by using an apparatus that was “more than 200 times as sensitive as the ordinary home receiving set.”⁶⁴ Violators were reported to the FRC. Although no penalties were levied on the offending stations, the FRC had “the power to make the offending station hold to the assigned channel.”⁶⁵

Federal Communications Commission Brings Hope

Earl May appealed to the newly created Federal Communications Commission for a new frequency and was granted permission to operate at 710 kilocycles, which provided KMA with a clear channel frequency not occupied by another station. However, this status was short lived as Chicago’s powerhouse WGN, positioned at 720 kilocycles, filed

⁶² Ibid., 33.

⁶³ “Daily Check on Stations By Officer,” *The Evening Sentinel*, September 1, 1930, 1.

⁶⁴ Ibid., 1.

⁶⁵ Ibid., 1.

a complaint with the FCC objecting to the closeness of the new nearby signal.⁶⁶ KMA maintained its position for one month, until, without a hearing, the FCC honored WGN's request and KMA was ordered to return to its previous position.⁶⁷

In June 1934, KMA received a license to operate at 2,500 watts during the day and 1,000 watts at night, more than doubling its former output of 1,000 watts daily and 500 watts after dark. In 1935, the station operated at a wavelength of 930 kilocycles and broadcasted for approximately nine hours, sharing time with KGBZ in York, Nebraska. In August 1935, May journeyed to Washington, D.C., to petition the newly established FCC to allow them to air full time instead of sharing time with KGBZ whose license was suspended and under review.⁶⁸ By November 1935, the station sought full-time operation and filed an application to erect a 500-foot antenna tower, which, if the additional time was granted, would enable KMA to increase its power and coverage.⁶⁹ The expansion of time for KMA did not come without a fight. KMA was originally slated to begin a full-time schedule on May 8, 1936. However, KGBZ appealed the decision, forcing the FCC to order a stay to postpone the full-time hours.⁷⁰ In July 1936, the legal battle ended with May agreeing to purchase KGBZ, which permanently silenced the station.⁷¹ "Next September when our new RCA Equipment is all in place, and our Program Department is augmented with more periods dedicated to the assistance and service of our friends in the

⁶⁶ Birby, *KMA Radio*, 71.

⁶⁷ Ibid.

⁶⁸ "KMA Asking Full Time on the Air," *Shenandoah Gazette*, July 11, 1935, 1; "KMA Wants Full Time Schedule if KGBZ Leaves Air," *Shenandoah Gazette*, August 15, 1935, 1.

⁶⁹ "Recommends KMA for Extended Time," *Shenandoah Gazette*, November 26, 1935, 1.

⁷⁰ "Full-time Use of KMA is Postponed," *Shenandoah Gazette*, May 8, 1936, 1.

⁷¹ "Start KMA Tower with Experts and Day Men Combined," *Shenandoah Gazette*, July 28, 1936, 1.

farm audience, we will have gone a long way toward bringing the section of the country one of the Nation's great radio station," May proclaimed to the local newspaper.⁷²

The construction of a new transmitter building began in July 1936 and a new RCA transmitter with "high-fidelity" characteristics followed. "Only two other self-supporting antennas in the country will be higher than the KMA tower when completed," reported the Shenandoah newspaper.⁷³ These upgrades made it possible for KMA to forge ahead of other stations and make history for contributions such as being one of the earliest stations to begin a regular news broadcast in 1938.⁷⁴

On March 1, 1941, KMA changed its frequency from 930 AM to 960 AM, the position on the dial it has maintained to this day. Additionally, the station claimed to be the first Iowa station "to originate a transcontinental broadcast heard coast to coast when KMA Farm Service Department accompanied one of the last livestock relief shipments to Europe under UNRRA in 1947."⁷⁵

Direct Selling:

"You Will Never Sell Anything You Don't Talk"

The illegal frequency expansion of KFNF and KMA was just one indiscretion, as the two station owners also received intense criticism for their direct selling tactics, which incorporated their mail order businesses into broadcasting. The impact of direct selling by the Shenandoah stations was gauged in various ways, including the increase in postal revenues as a result of how successful the new stations were in selling items via

⁷² KMA begins full time on air this week after delay," *Shenandoah Gazette*, August 7, 1936, 1.

⁷³ "KMA Starts New Transmitter Bldg. On Highway 48," *Shenandoah Gazette*, July 7, 1936, 1.

⁷⁴ "KMA Radio Firsts," *KMA Guide*, July-August 1975, 13.

⁷⁵ *Ibid.*, 12.

the airwaves. In January 1928, the *Des Moines Register* reported “considerable money was spent by the seed and nursery farms,” which was cited as the reason for the 40 percent gain in postal receipts.⁷⁶

Field and May increased their profits because their existing knowledge of the targeted demographic was indispensable as they figured out how to develop programming and maximize the potential of their existing brick-and-mortar facilities and new radio stations. Neither men needed to travel far to secure talent; their existing employees and loved ones were drafted to serve as announcers and entertainers. Radio talent was often homegrown with no special training or skill, which meant that most programs were early reality programming with on-air personalities creating content on the spot and engineers solving problems in real time. In recounting the way May developed raw talent, the Rev. Edythe Stirlen wrote, “Some of the most featured and best paid talent on his station have not been the best educated.”⁷⁷

For May, an engaging personality was one of the most marketable attributes an on-air personality could possess. If you possessed that characteristic, May taught you what he considered necessary for the announcer and the May brand to succeed. For example, Stirlen recalled attending meetings where May instructed the staff on how to be successful on the air: “Remember, you will never sell anything you don’t talk.”⁷⁸ Stirlen carried that message with her and concluded, “for whether it is merchandise or religion, friendship of what have you, that advice is true.”⁷⁹

⁷⁶ “Shenandoah reports a 40 per cent,” *Des Moines Register*, January 1, 1928, 4G.

⁷⁷ Edythe Stirlen, “A Tribute to Earl E. May,” *S.O.S. Signal*, 7, January 1947, 7. Box 14, Stirlen Papers.

⁷⁸ *Ibid.*

⁷⁹ *Ibid.*

The young executives birthing the advertising industry on Madison could have learned lessons from Field, whose station found a husband for a widow because of an advertisement aired on KFNF. Within a month's time, the Pulaski, Iowa, woman received nearly 200 letters, 177 of which were from professional men.⁸⁰ However, people were not that concerned with these kinds of advertisements; rather, businesses selling the same wares as Field and May and those of their advertisers were not as happy with the direct sales methods used by the two owners. The recommendation that the industry regulate itself first discussed during the Fourth Radio Conference came to fruition on March 25, 1929, when the National Association of Broadcasters adopted a code of ethics. "In their desire to do their own housecleaning without waiting for regulation by the Federal Radio Commission, the first rule they agreed on prevented the broadcasting of offensive matter," *The New York Times* reported the next day.⁸¹ Four of the eight codes addressed advertising, but most dealt specifically with broadcasters verifying products or services advertised to ensure the products would not harm nor the messages deceive. However, none of the codes specifically addressed the issue of direct selling, unless that is, one of the direct selling stations used derogatory statements against a station or an individual.⁸²

One of the most vocal opponents of the Shenandoah direct sale stations was Francis St. Austell of Des Moines, Iowa, the president of the Iowa Radio Listeners' League. St. Austell took the two station owners to task nationally and offered sharp critiques in print and on air. On Christmas night 1927, Austell appeared on New York's

⁸⁰ "KFNF's Appeal Won A Husband For Widow At Pulaski, Iowa," *Sentinel World*, November 18, 1925, 1.

⁸¹ "Stations to Regulate Radio Advertising," *New York Times*, March 26, 1929, 46.

⁸² *Ibid.*

WEAF to discuss the issue of direct selling.⁸³ In 1928, St. Austell voiced his complaints about direct selling in a national radio magazine. “Henry Field has developed salesmanship by radio into a very fine art-so fine an art that many claim that if his example were followed by others fortunate enough to own a radio station, the whole retail business structure of the country might be endangered. The selling of merchandise by radio is so profitable that it is surprising to find so few radio stations engaged in the pastime.”⁸⁴

Although the direct sales stations entertained their listeners with live music and informed with market reports for farmers and religious programs like that of the Rev. Edythe Stirlen, they spent the bulk of their programming times promoting items for purchase and convincing listeners they were getting a better deal via the radio than from nearby merchants. Entrepreneurs without the ability to advertise on radio or through printed means viewed such stations as a threat, a sentiment also shared by listeners. Mrs. O.F. Hiser of Arnolds Park, Iowa, contributed the local merchants’ view to the *Des Moines Register’s* discussion and suggested that direct sales stations used “unethical” tactics to lure customers away from stores close to home. “If these stations are allowed to pick out the cream of items from merchants’ lines, the local merchant will soon have to quit as he cannot exist by sale of staples alone in which there is little or no profit.”⁸⁵ Hiser reminded readers that the Shenandoah stores did not supply the staples needed by families in other communities; thus, a community devoted to purchasing their major

⁸³ “The Microphone Will Present,” *New York Times*, Dec. 25, 1927, XX12.

⁸⁴ Francis St. Austell, “Direct Selling By Radio,” *Radio Broadcast Advertiser*, May 1928, 58.

⁸⁵ Mrs. O.F. Hiser, “Arnolds Park, Ia.-To the Editor,” *The Des Moines Register*, January 13, 1928.

purchases through the mail order system jeopardized their accessibility to eggs, vegetables, and produce. Other listeners, like I.M. Ganter of Oskaloosa, Iowa, thought that radio marketing ignited market demand that benefited local merchants, and subsequently contributed to the Iowa economy.⁸⁶

In 1928, the League developed a campaign against the direct selling stations and distributed 450 petitions in Iowa and ballots to 15 other states seeking to convince Congress to make the practice of direct sales by radio illegal.⁸⁷ In the spring of 1928, St. Austell even journeyed to Washington, D.C., so he could voice his grievances in meetings with Federal Radio Commissioners Sam Pickard and Eugene O. Sykes. St. Austell reported to *Des Moines Register* readers:

Now I will state with brutal frankness that the result of all my talking, all the persuasive eloquence I could muster, was – nix, absolutely nix – and worse than that, Commissioner Pickard said quite fairly that there was nothing in the radio law to give the commission authority to interfere in the matter of direct selling. The commission, he said, was appointed to administer the law and would do just that and no more.⁸⁸

Listeners as well as business owners joined in the discourse that continued in Iowa newspapers. In 1928, at the height of the direct sales conflict, C.E. Williams of Stanhope, Iowa, a central Iowa town of about 400, suggested that customers would patronize local merchants the same way they did businesses marketed via radio if local merchants made the public aware of their products with similar advertisements and guaranteed their wares. Williams wrote:

⁸⁶ I.M. Ganter, “Mail Order Competition, *Des Moines Register*, January 15, 1928, E7.

⁸⁷ “Selling By Radio Opposed,” *New York Times*, February 1, 1928, 20.

⁸⁸ Francis St. Austell, “Radio Ramblings,” *Des Moines Register*, April 15, 1928, L-11.

I cannot agree that radio-sold business is taken wholly from the local business man for if it was not sold by these radio-stations quite a large portion of it would be ordered from mail order houses from catalog advertising. Radio is a modern way of advertising and those that expect to keep step with the progress of time had better begin to get in line for the march for more business.⁸⁹

Other Iowans such as J.C. Colburn of Webster City thought that Iowans who believed in the so-called benefits of direct selling stations were being “hoodwinked” and were not considering the impact on the economy of their local communities.⁹⁰ The letter printed in *The Register* reported that the Shenandoah stations were not alone in the direct selling genre, but cited stations in Muscatine, Iowa, as well as in Cincinnati among the direct selling culprits. Colburn wrote: “There has got to be a stopping place and the sooner our authorized radio commission acts on the point and passes a law prohibiting the wholesale confiscation of trade, the better the people of the state of Iowa will be.”⁹¹

The Evening Sentinel, a Shenandoah newspaper, even weighed in on the debate, although it could be assumed newspapers viewed commercial radio as a threat. Instead, the *Sentinel* supported radio, citing the costs associated to providing the service to the public. In addition to printing the schedules of the stations and other news pertaining to radio, there was no indication in the newspapers examined that animosity or tension existed on the part of the print media. Moreover, the Shenandoah papers recognized the prominence of the local stations and ran news about the radio industry on its front pages while the flagship publication of the state, *The Des Moines Register*, even published St. Austell’s column devoted to the matters of the ether.

⁸⁹ “Up To the Merchant,” *Des Moines Register*, January 9, 1928, 10.

⁹⁰ J.C. Colburn, “The trouble with you people...,” *Des Moines Register*, January 10, 1928, 4.

⁹¹ *Ibid.*

For the *Register*, the debate was more than an issue about the quality of programming or the preference of direct versus indirect advertising. The newspaper saw the controversy as a potential threat to censorship and an attack on the Marketplace of Ideas. “There can be no discussion of this sort without new appreciation of the dangers of censorship, new recognition of the necessity for allowances base on differences in taste, differences in viewpoints. It emphasizes the right of various groups to different lines of information, different sorts of entertainment.”⁹²

The value of advertising was also on the Commission’s agenda as it considered Wisconsin State University’s objection to sharing a frequency with KMA because of the station’s use of advertising, which WSUI argued took time away from its cultural programming.⁹³ No immediate decision was made on the time-sharing agreement; however, the issue of direct selling on air was a matter the Advertising Club of Des Moines, Iowa, wanted the FRC to consider as it made future judgments and regulations.⁹⁴ The Club submitted resolutions concerning the sale of products via radio, which included having selling messages approved by the station manager or a designee of the FRC, submitted to the FRC, broadcast as submitted with the time of the broadcast noted and signed by the announcer, and numbered as “Sales Bulletin No.____.”⁹⁵ The Club advised that the station maintain a copy of the bulletin while sending a copy to the Commission. “We suggest that the foregoing requirements will give a reliable and permanent record

⁹² “Radio Discussion,” *Des Moines Register*, January 7, 1928, morning edition.

⁹³ “Federal Radio Commission Studies Problem of Radio Sales Talks,” *New York Times*, Aug. 14, 1927.

⁹⁴ *Ibid.*

⁹⁵ *Ibid.*

from which the purchaser may determine the exact representations made and will be conducive to honest advertising.”⁹⁶

News reports suggest the FRC took the group as well as letters it received under advisement and noted there was a decrease in direct selling by radio since the establishment of the FRC.⁹⁷ FRC Chairman W.H.G. Bullard believed the current transgressors did so because they were unaware of the public’s opposition. Bullard believed that once notified, stations changed their course and the letters received by the FRC allowed them to advise stations. Bullard explained:

The argument that radio direct advertising is good and inoffensive to the public, because it creates sales in some instances, is not a valid argument. If you broadcast a strong bargain appeal, and if the bargain is obviously genuine and worth while, you will make sales. The advertiser, considering only the orders, may think that he is attracting customers and building up his business, but I do not think that he would remain under any such belief if he could look over the protests, objections and condemnations regarding his effort which come to the commission.⁹⁸

Supporters of direct advertising believed that its opponents were not simply opposed to the commercial threat of direct advertising; rather, supporters cited criticism of the farmer stations as an attack on the culture of rural broadcasters and their audiences. Editorial writer G.W. Dodd explained: “The farmers of all the Midwest are rallying to the defense of the stations that are friendly to them unreasonably will cause an upheaval in Washington that will be memorable.”⁹⁹ KFNF and KMA were known as stations representing farm interests while Dodd cited “eastern and large city stations feature the

⁹⁶ “Federal Radio Commission Studies Problem of Radio Sales Talks, *New York Times*, Aug. 14, 1927.

⁹⁷ Ibid.

⁹⁸ Ibid.

⁹⁹ G.W. Dodd, “The Radio Controversy,” *Evening Sentinel*, January 10, 1928, 3.

city interests and eastern interests.”¹⁰⁰ While farm wives enjoyed the homemaker shows that taught them how to use the items they grew and produced at home or bought at the local seed and nursery stores, farmers utilized the market reports given each morning and the farming advice provided.

The lowbrow cultural tastes of rural listeners proved problematic for other listeners who thought the farmer stations interfered with the frequency of other stations that offered entertainment, such as orchestra performances from New York ballrooms, which were considered more refined or described as potted palm music.

Field and May maintained their positions on the overarching benefits of direct sales via radio and defended their positions whether they were lobbying government officials or community members. When May spoke at the weekly supper of the local Kiwanis Club in February 1928, he discussed the increased costs of operating a station and what the town could do to help the local stations. *The Evening Sentinel* reported, “May emphasized that the thing needed most was petitions from Shenandoah merchants, stating the air does not tear down the community but instead has been a great benefit, stimulating trade and increasing business in practically all lines.”¹⁰¹ Based on the brief published, May responded:

In regard to the controversy over the broadcasting stations a lot of people seem to forget that somebody must pay. It costs money, lots of it, to erect and equip a radio station: it costs money to provide programs. NO individual and no company is going to keep up that expense very long without some provision for getting the money back...Rest assured that these situations, no matter how altruistic their professions, are getting their money back in some way. The listeners are going to pay for it, whether the program is on prunes or bridge.¹⁰²

¹⁰⁰ Ibid.

¹⁰¹ “May Discusses Radio Situation,” *The Evening Sentinel*, February 18, 1928.

¹⁰² “Somebody Pays,” *The Evening Sentinel*, February 2, 1928.

Advertising was still under investigation but attention was focused on truth in advertising, which became the concern of the Federal Trade Commission. KFNF and KMA may have been at the fore of the direct sales controversy but the *New York Times* reported that the first such investigation by the FTC involved the Omaha Tanning Company, for its alleged fraudulent sales talk.¹⁰³

Public Service, Convenience, and Necessity

Secretary of Commerce Hoover often used the word “public” or referenced radio as a “national resource” from the very beginning. During his first radio conference, Hoover said the issues of broadcasting were “of primary public interest.”¹⁰⁴ The former stations were rooted in serving the community; thus, the mandate of the Radio Act of 1927 of “public service, convenience, and necessity” was not a burdensome one to fulfill since their programming already embraced the balanced wheel concept advised by the government.

Broadcasting was compared to the field of public utilities because of the dynamics between the public and the monopolies that controlled them. Thus, the terms “public interest,” “convenience,” and “necessity” were adapted from the Transportation Act of 1920.¹⁰⁵ In essence, the mandate was developed on the basis that the public would benefit from the economic influence and technological advances of private industry. “This definition of ‘public interest’ coupled clear signal reception with responsible

¹⁰³ “Radio Discussion,” *Des Moines Register*, January 7, 1928, morning edition.

¹⁰⁴ Bensman, *The Beginning of Broadcast Regulation in the Twentieth Century*, 51.

¹⁰⁵ *Ibid.*, 209.

programming,” Louise Benjamin further explained.¹⁰⁶ If the government determined who broadcast, private entities determined how they fulfilled the “public interest.” Benjamin argued that as the industry developed, it must be considered that because larger, well-financed stations were given the most favorable frequency assignments, smaller commercial and non-commercial stations were dismissed from sharing their messages on the ether. Messages were mostly conservative in an effort to not offend and often supported the status quo.¹⁰⁷ “If the FRC licensed the right kind of people with the right moral values, then Congress would have nothing to fear.”¹⁰⁸

What should be broadcast was a matter that remained on the industry’s as well as the government’s agenda even as the chaos of the new medium calmed. As the industry continued to monitor the sales talk of the Shenandoah entrepreneurs and others, the industry also found itself trying to protect speech while protecting listeners from controversial and inflammatory programming, such as the broadcasts of Catholic priest Rev. Charles Coughlin of Detroit. Coughlin is often grouped with religious broadcasters, but his ministry had little to do with his Catholic faith or spirituality in general and more to do with criticizing the banking industry or the government and its officials.

Religious Broadcasting

Since the beginning of commercial radio, Christians viewed the medium as another way God provided to fulfill Jesus’ command to preach the Gospel to all

¹⁰⁶ Benjamin, *Freedom of the Air and the Public Interest*, 30.

¹⁰⁷ *Ibid.*, 31

¹⁰⁸ Mark Goodman and Mark Gring, “The Radio Act of 1927: Progressive Ideology, Epistemology, and Praxis,” *Rhetoric & Public Affairs* 3, no. 3 (2000): 407.

nations.¹⁰⁹ “Radio served as a pulpit for evangelism on a scale impossible only decades before,” said Cultural historian Tona Hangen, who chronicled the cultural work of local and national religious broadcasters.¹¹⁰ For revivalists like Paul Rader of Chicago, radio allowed traveling evangelists to share their tent revival sermons with the nation. Conservative religious broadcasters like Rader (*National Radio Chapel*) and Charles E. Fuller (*Old-Fashioned Revival Hour*), who were also known as fundamentalists, used radio to preach a gospel that sought to return listeners to the core doctrines of Christianity. Rader, who was one of the first religious broadcasters, first used the medium in 1922 to promote and share one of his Chicago revivals.¹¹¹ Rader, who was one of the first radio fundamentalist preachers in Chicago, began the *National Radio Chapel* on April 26, 1925, after buying the entire Sunday broadcasting day.¹¹²

The revolutionary work radio did for religion was likened to the Protestant Reformation ignited by Martin Luther when he nailed his 95 Theses to the Cathedral door, explained Ben Armstrong, a communications scholar and executive of the National Religious Broadcasters. Armstrong, who coined the term the electric church, said the early religious broadcasters saw radio “as an instrument of God, brought into being by His hand to help tell all people of His reconciling love in Jesus Christ.”¹¹³ In writing the history of religious broadcasting, Armstrong does not highlight the governmental

¹⁰⁹ See Mathew 28.

¹¹⁰ Tona J. Hangen, *Redeeming the Dial: Radio, Religion, & Popular Culture in America* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2002), 5.

¹¹¹ *Ibid.*, 43.

¹¹² *Ibid.*, 45.

¹¹³ Armstrong, *The Electric Church*, 10 and 33.

challenges of religious broadcasting; rather, he focused on the heavy financial responsibility broadcasting presented. The scarcity principle did not only apply to the limited availability of the airwaves but also to the availability of airtime, which factored into the premium costs that independent religious broadcasters had to pay when they did not receive sustaining time from stations using religious programming as a way to meet the public interest mandate.

Even if the assignments of religious broadcasters were divine in nature, they still had to adhere to the laws of the land, which did not always provide them the grace to stay on the air. Churches and bible colleges were some of the first institutions to retain radio station licenses, however, these licenses were often hard to keep as regulation strengthened and their messages and agendas were questioned. While religious stations once held the largest classification of stations, only 56 religious stations existed in February 1928.¹¹⁴ The number decreased further once General Order 40 forced others off the spectrum by labeling them “propaganda stations”¹¹⁵ or assigning them to marginal wavelengths which made it more difficult to adhere to standards and retain their licenses.

The government’s plan to reallocate frequencies hurt educational, labor, and religious broadcasters, such as the Christian Catholic Apostolic Christian Church (CCC) located in Zion, Illinois.¹¹⁶ CCC used radio to promote its eclectic religious beliefs and exploit the talent within the group; however, the international radio audience the sect

¹¹⁴ Arthur T. Brown, “The Effects of Modern Radio Broadcasting Upon Religion,” *Radio News*, vol. 9, February 1928.

¹¹⁵ Hilmes, *Only Connect*, 122.

¹¹⁶ Doerksen, *American Babel*, 105-116.

built from 1923 to 1928 could no longer locate the station after the Midwestern states were affected by the reallocation order.¹¹⁷

If legislation and regulatory requirements may have forced stations off of the air, the rules of individual networks as well as those created by organizations such as the National Broadcast Association and the National Religious Broadcasters muted controversial or religious messages that did not conform to the standards of the industry regulators. Hilmes suggests that the popularity of Coughlin actually inspired two major policy changes that affected religious broadcasters.¹¹⁸ Journalism historian Marshall Fishwick offered this explanation of the priest's ministry that may help us understand why: "The crux of Coughlin's appeal, like that of Hitler, was not love but hatred. He sensed, and took advantage of the neurotic anxiety all around him. He provided a conflict in which angry members of his audience could know and confront their real enemies. He focused on individuals – which he took care to name – who were devilish conspirators. Join my army, he promised, and we will overcome."¹¹⁹

With the support of thousand of his Radio League of the Little Flower, Coughlin took his message to CBS and in October 1930 started a broadcast on the network.¹²⁰ "As long as the charismatic priest stayed on the subject of spiritual aid to a country in crisis, he provoked little concern. But his very engagement with his audience soon led him into

¹¹⁷ Ibid.

¹¹⁸ Hilmes, *Only Connect*, 124.

¹¹⁹ Marshall W. Fishwick, "Father Coughlin Time: The Radio and Redemption," *Journal of Popular Culture* 22, no. 2 (1988): 40.

¹²⁰ Hilmes, *Only Connect*, 122.

the foray of politics,” explained Hilmes.¹²¹ Although Coughlin’s broadcasts were popular among listeners across the country, many reported their disdain for the demagogue’s broadcast to the FCC. The Commission responded by noting Section 326 of the Communications Act of 1934, which prohibited the agency from censoring material or inhibiting free speech.¹²² Communication’s professor James A. Brown examined the files of the Commission and located what he identified as the “traditional position” of the agency’s response to complaints about Coughlin:

The Commission has entered no order denying Father Coughlin the right to broadcast, nor would it have authority under the law to promulgate such an order. Each station license is the sole judge of the material to be presented over its facilities and the Commission may not issue instructions and the Commission may exercise no power of censorship with respect thereto.”¹²³

While the FCC could not inhibit what Coughlin said, the industry eventually muted his voice by first limiting his access. Only months after contracting with CBS, the relationship came to a screeching halt when the network learned of divisive comments included within an upcoming broadcast. Instead of discussing the initial issue, Coughlin criticized the network for attempting to censor him.¹²⁴ After cancelling the contract, CBS decided to follow NBC and no longer allow individual religious broadcasters to purchase time.¹²⁵ The network’s new rule did not stop the priest, as independent local stations still existed and sold him time. Like other broadcasters, Coughlin used print publications like

¹²¹ Ibid.

¹²² James A. Brown, “Selling Airtime for Controversy: NAB Self-Regulation and Father Coughlin,” *Journalism Broadcasting* 199 (1980): 206.

¹²³ Ibid., 207.

¹²⁴ Hilmes, *Only Connect*, 122.

¹²⁵ Ibid.

the *Social Justice* newsletter to circulate his venom and his program remained popular until the late 1930s when his popularity waned and the NAB updated its broadcast code in 1939 with a new code. This self-regulatory rule served as the preface to the “troubled” Fairness Doctrine, which was based on the “public interest, convenience, and necessity” standard.¹²⁶

Stirlen’s broadcast, which focused on biblical teaching, preaching, and singing, may have been considered less threatening than programs such as Coughlin’s that were labeled “propaganda,” a term used to define other religious programs forced off of the air during the interwar years.

Sustaining Time

Another effect of legislation on religious broadcasting was the introduction of sustaining time programming, which came into existence after the passage of the Communications Act of 1934 and answered the call of reserving a portion of the spectrum for nonprofit, education and religious stations.”¹²⁷ Instead of paid programming, stations provided sustaining, or complimentary, time to local churches or independent broadcasters like Stirlen as one way to meet the public service standard. Because of the dominance of commercial broadcasting, the FCC and the industry concurred that sustaining programming aided with a “well-balanced program structure,” which was essential to broadcasting in the public interest.¹²⁸

¹²⁶ Ibid., 124.

¹²⁷ Hoover, *Mass Media Religion*, 50.

¹²⁸ FCC, Public Service Responsibility of Broadcast Licenses Report (1946), 12.

Religious media scholars contend that if the government had set aside space for the marginalized stations instead of providing free time to broadcasters who would have been left off of the air, the measure would have resulted in the lost of commercial station licenses.¹²⁹ Independent stations made their own decisions on how they would distribute sustaining time while networks established relationships with ecumenical fellowships, such as the Federal Council of the Churches of Christ (FCCCA) and later the National Council of Churches.¹³⁰ Robert S. Fortner contends modernists and fundamentalists approached radio in different ways and that the FCCCA, which took the modernist approach to Christianity, joined forces with the networks to provide generic religious programming that was not sectarian.¹³¹ It was thought that this type of programming would attract a large audience that did not rely on the audience's religious affiliation, which would help religious broadcasting in meeting the public interest obligation.¹³²

After CBS decided to discontinue selling time to independent broadcasters, the network established the *Church of the Air*, which provided free air time to a group of authorized religious bodies.¹³³ While this system provided listeners access to a diversity of religious messages, Hoover explained that the move was not devoid of politics. "The sustaining-time system effectively segregated religious broadcasting by theological origin. Establishment, mainline religion found itself welcomed on network (and local)

¹²⁹ Ibid., 51.

¹³⁰ Ibid.

¹³¹ Robert S. Fortner, "The Church and the Debate over Radio," in *Media and Religion in America and History*, ed. Wm David Sloan (Northport, AL: Vision Press, 2000), 230-243.

¹³² Ibid.

¹³³ Hilmes, *Only Connect*, 122-123.

sustaining-time while conservative, evangelical, and independent groups became wedded to paid-time broadcasting,” Hoover noted.¹³⁴

As the network system expanded and local independents linked up with them, broadcasters like Stirlen were required to pay for time since the stations could not take advantage of more nationally known broadcasters whose programs were distributed by the networks and could be documented toward the public service requirement. The station that once needed her services displaced her in an effort to reap the fullest bounty of network affiliation.

Conclusion

To survive the chaos of the medium as well as the governmental solutions of legislation and the rules of the National Association of Broadcasting, owners of early independent and religious stations had to be flexible as well as vigilant in their efforts to comply with the ever-changing laws of the land. Early licensees as well as the government quickly realized that radio was not for the hobbyist, but it was quickly becoming a business that needed financing, regulation, and supervision. The technology and its capacity outpaced legislation, but that did not prevent the industry from evolving and making the necessary adjustments to make the system work. However, the technology would have been obsolete without the ingenuity and risk-taking nature of people like farmer-station owners Henry Field and Earl May. To understand the true capacity of the technology is to unpack how the two men created the stations they did, which allowed Stirlen to create the program and community she did.

¹³⁴ Stewart Hoover, *Mass Media Religion: The Social Sources of the Electronic Church* (Newbury Park, CA: Sage, 1988), 53.

CHAPTER 3

LENSES OF ANALYSIS

To study an audience and its broadcaster who are no longer among us is a daunting task that requires the use of multiple lenses of analysis. This study sought to not only understand how the radio church community was formed, but also how they came to interpret and understand their union. Thus, it was necessary to use two conceptual frameworks to understand how this group created a common text and how that text was read and interpreted by its creators.

Imagined Community

Political scientist Benedict Anderson, who wrote about the concept of nation as an “imagined political community,” postulated that media was created for profit, such as newspapers and novels bound a nation of readers together and allowed them to envision themselves as a people united and not a nation divided.¹³⁵ “It is imagined because the members of even the smallest nation will never know most of their fellow-members, meet them, or even hear of them, yet in the minds of each lives the image of their communion,”¹³⁶ Anderson explained.

Through the act of reading a newspaper, readers imagined how others within their nation lived. “Yet each [newspaper reader] is well aware that the ceremony he performs is being replicated simultaneously by thousands (or millions) of others of whose

¹³⁵ Benedict Anderson, *Imagined Communities* (London: Verso, 1991), 6.

¹³⁶ *Ibid.*

existence he is confident, yet of whose identity he had not the slightest of notion,” Anderson further explained.¹³⁷

Although these people will never physically meet, through their interpretation of the pictures and copy read, they derive “images of communion” that enable them to identify and commune with the larger body of readers. Through the ideology embedded within the images, an individual citizen is able to become conscious of their place in society-at-large without face-to-face interaction or geographic location. The formation of the nation takes place in the consciousness of the individual as a result of media consumption, which infuses the elements of the nation.

Cultural historians Susan Douglas and Michele Hilmes have expanded Anderson’s theory by examining how early radio had the same community-building capacity. Through the new medium of radio, listeners across the United States were in on the same jokes and experienced the intimacy of President Roosevelt’s radio “visits” to their home as an imagined American community. Whether listening in from their rural Iowa homes or in urban centers like Chicago or St. Louis, Missouri, a simultaneous experience occurred similar to the understanding Anderson found existed with early newspaper readers. Subsequently, a sense of nationhood developed as they tuned into *Amos and Andy* and the *Jack Benny Show*. The Progressive administration during this era envisioned that the medium would be able to “nationalize” an audience that was now made up of new immigrants. Through radio programming, those who were new to the United States learned what it meant to be an American.

In describing her early years in radio, Stirlen explained, “I would build up a religious following at a certain time of the day.” During that time of day, which varied

¹³⁷ Ibid., 35.

over the course of her radio ministry as corporate interests overshadowed the interest of the marginalized religious broadcast audience, the community imagined their existence.

Interpretive Community

Stirlen and her religious imagined community operated as what Stanley Fish called “community-constituted-interpreters” in the aural environment of their imagined religious community. Because of the varying ways of community entry, members could have engaged with the community as a listener, reader, SOS Club member, or some combination of the three who developed codes of communications and interpretations was crucial to the stability of the community. The conceptual framework of interpretive community was used to analyze how the “images of communion” emerge and are interpreted as community members determine and share meanings of their imagined religious community. Because this case presents texts from the broadcasts, the magazine, letters shared between members, and the conversations of the physical interactions, it was important to determine the shared codes and meanings that aid in establishing the imagined community

Fish, a legal and literary scholar, originally conceptualized interpretive community in his 1980 text, *Is There a Text in This Class?* The theory connects the engagement and interpretation of varying media products has evolved beyond literary criticism. Fish writes:

Interpretive communities are made up of those who share interpretive strategies not for reading (in the conversational sense) for writing texts, for constituting the properties and assigning their intentions. In other words, these strategies exist prior to the act of reading and therefore determine the shape of what is read rather than, as is usually assumed, the other way around.¹³⁸

¹³⁸ Stanley Fish. *Is There a Text in This Class?* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1980), 171.

For Fish, whose work is based on literary communities within academic institutions, meaning is not isolated within the text; rather, meaning arises once the reader interrogates the text. While there will be various readings because of the diversity of the audience, there is still a shared interpretation because the reader is situated within the community of a particular genre. The strategies used to interpret the text essentially exist before the text is even picked up; thus, how a text is interpreted exists prior to the actual reading.

Various media audiences construct their own interpretations for understanding and engaging in their communities.¹³⁹ In her study, *Reading the Romance*, a seminal reception study, Janice Radway found that the meanings readers attached to the text were the result of a fusion of things, including the text, the reader, and culture. The Midwestern women Radway interviewed and surveyed were a family of readers. Though Radway studied the decoders of media products, which is more consistent with the framework of interpretive community research, another vein of research influenced by Fish and the work of Stuart Hall focuses on those who decode messages like journalists who become their own interpretive community. Barbie Zelizer and other communications scholars have analyzed journalists and their established professional norms and how they perform the day-to-day activities of their trade.¹⁴⁰ Zelizer analyzed journalistic discourses that emerged in the wake of Watergate and the assassination of the President John F.

¹³⁹ Janice Radway, *Reading the Romance: Women, Patriarchy, and Popular Literature*, 2nd ed. (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1991).

¹⁴⁰ See Barbie Zelizer, *Taking Journalism Seriously* (Thousand Oaks, CA.: Sage, 2004); Dan Berkowitz and James Terkeurst, J.V. (1999). Community as interpretive community: Rethinking the journalist-source relationship. *Journal of Communication*, 125-136; Parameswaran, R. (2006). Military Metaphors, Masculine Modes, and Critical Commentary: Deconstructing journalists' inner tales of September 11. *Journal of Communication Inquiry*, 30(1), 42-64.

Kennedy.¹⁴¹ While carrying out their professional tasks, Zelizer found that reporters morph into a community that must in turn negotiate their identity and power.

Zelizer's conceptualization of interpretive community serves as the framework for investigating journalism producers, such as the North Carolina journalists involved in a public journalism project that presumably goes awry during the coverage of the 1996 U.S. Senate race between Republican Jesse Helms and Democrat Harvey Gantt.¹⁴² The framework of interpretive community used in this study "assumes a communal effort on how to respond to an event, a communal give-and-take that occurs in the working out of meaning."¹⁴³

Methods and Sources

Methodology

Scholars have long argued that history is not and could never be scientific because of the many biases historians encounter regarding sampling, informants, and problems in asking questions of the past. However, historians have proven through time that they are empirical researchers with the ability to couple argument with evidence of all forms. Over time, these arguments have changed as historians have evolved from simply telling what people did to what people meant as they navigated their times. Postmodernism ushered in the reshaping and rethinking of scholarship beyond literary and biographical works, and prompted historians to look at stories of the past in the contexts of society,

¹⁴¹ Barbie Zelizer, "Journalists as Interpretive Communities," in *Social Meanings of News*, ed. Dan Berkowitz (Thousand Oaks, CA, 1997), 401-419.

¹⁴² M. Brewin, "The interpretive community and reform: Public journalism plays out in North Carolina," *Journalism of Communication Inquiry*, 23(3) (1999): 222-238.

¹⁴³ Stirlen's audience of religious media users qualifies as an interpretive community because of its positioning as a genre community, which Lindlof contends is more easily identifiable. In this case, there is continual negotiation as the consumers also participate as producers, which is something that Stirlen as chief producer embraced and promoted.

economics, religions, and politics.¹⁴⁴ In the past 50 years, historians have followed in the social science tradition and have employed the tools from behavioralism and quantification to language, interpretation, and culture to construct the past.¹⁴⁵

Historians, especially those employing the cultural history approach, must naturally act as bricoleurs if they are to capture the events of the past. I have chosen to triangulate my methods by not only analyzing the images and text of the magazines, but also Stirlen's personal correspondence, scrapbooks, newspaper clippings, and additional content within the collection. I also interviewed or was in conversation with Stirlen's grandchildren, former co-workers, community members, and other historians who have studied Iowa broadcasting history.

The cultural history approach allowed me to answer the questions posed because the conceptual framework does not methodologically inhibit the study. The complete body of the Stirlen Collection and the other documents located were examined without the use of narrowly defined categories.

David Paul Nord has compared cultural history to social history because of its ability to chronicle "the lives of common people."¹⁴⁶ Nord explained that in order to carry out Carey's proposal, historians need to not only focus on the producers of the journalistic record, "but also on the *readers* of journalism and on the cultural contexts in

¹⁴⁴ David Paul Nord, "The Practice of Historical Research," in *Mass Communication Research and Theory*, ed Guido H. Stempel III, David H. Weaver, and G. Cleveland Wilhoit (Boston: Allyn and Bacon, 2003), 366-367.

¹⁴⁵ *Ibid.*, 367.

¹⁴⁶ David Paul Nord, *Mass Communication Research and Theory*, eds. Guido H. Stempel III, David H. Weaver, and G. Cleveland Wilhoit (Boston: Allyn & Bacon, 2003): 368.

which those readers read.”¹⁴⁷ Cultural history is a composite of intellectual history, which defines human thought, and social history, which is about human action.¹⁴⁸ Cultural history is more specifically concerned with the human action of “common people” and “is concerned not merely with what these people did but what meanings they attached to what they did.”¹⁴⁹

One main component of this study is to understand the external relationships that Stirlen created and fostered within Iowa and surrounding communities. While the lapse in time does not allow the researcher to conduct an audience or reception study, this aspect and others can be examined by studying Stirlen’s personal papers and the *Signal*.

Gauging the Imagined Community

Although a community may be considered imagined, it is necessary to operationalize how I determined an “image of communion” or evidence of Stirlen and her audience imagining their religious community. Upon the guided entry of my data, I had to determine how community was articulated or indicated with the various texts examined.

Like an early newspaper publisher or book editor, Stirlen was influential in the construction of images that united the community. Thus, I zeroed in on texts that included a direct reference to the *Radio Church of the Air*, which was what she called the imagined religious community. I also sought to examine passages that included words or phrases such as “community,” “membership,” “radio friends,” and pronouns such as “our” and

¹⁴⁷ Ibid., 376.

¹⁴⁸ David Paul Nord, “Intellectual History, Social History, Cultural History... and Our History,” *Journalism Quarterly* 67, no. 4 (Winter 1990): 645.

¹⁴⁹ Ibid., 646.

“we,” which were used by Stirlen and members of the audience. Moreover, I examined explicit references to the community, or a member’s identification with the *Radio Church of the Air* as an organization or the Send Out Sunshine (S.O.S.) clubs, an aid society that existed in the early years of the radio broadcast.

Source Material

The historical evidence used for this study fall into several categories, including published and unpublished printed materials and personal records, official documents, oral sources, photographs, and broadcast records published in secondary sources.

Primary source material for this study is located in the Edythe Stirlen Papers housed in the Iowa Women’s Archives at the University of Iowa in Iowa City, Iowa. The collection spans the period from 1931 to the year of her retirement from KMA in 1981. The collection includes Stirlen’s personal correspondence, sermon transcripts, newspaper articles, scrapbooks, photographs, Bibles, and poems. Transcripts of her radio sermons from 1940 to 1975 are a major feature of the collection. Researchers have seldom used this collection, according to Karen Mason, curator of the Iowa Women’s Archives.

Nearly all issues of the *S.O.S. (Send Out Sunshine) Signal* magazine from the April 1935 inaugural issue to the final issue in November 1981 are also located in the collection. The magazine was originally published monthly, but it was changed to a bi-monthly publication. The magazine is composed of Stirlen’s sermons, photographs, poems, and letters from the sick and shut-in members of her radio audience, advice, testimonies of healing, and health updates. In my possession and in the collection are two books published by Stirlen in 1978, *From the Land of the Tumbleweed: Tales of my*

Childhood and *The Little Minister's Devotional Selection*. The latter begins with an eight-page introduction that includes an autobiography.

Other manuscript collections have also been useful for this study. Another collection of interest in the Iowa Women's Archives is the Evelyn Birkby Collection of Radio Homemaker Materials, 1919-2001. I have also interviewed Evelyn Birkby of Sidney, Iowa. Birkby, a newspaper columnist and famous radio homemaker, briefly documented Stirlen's radio career in *Neighboring on the Air: Cooking with the KMA Radio Homemakers*. Her collection includes copies of the *Kitchen Klatter* magazine, a publication that promoted the famous homemaker program of the same name. Stirlen appeared on the cover of the magazine in 1929 and a story about her early ministry appeared in the edition. The Iowa City office of the State Historical Society of Iowa also maintains the papers of KFNF owner, Henry P. Field. The Greater Shenandoah Historical Society and Museum has also been accessed, as it maintains a file on Stirlen, files on both stations and their owners, and files on the history and religious life of Shenandoah. The National Radio Heritage Association in Council Bluffs, Iowa, has also provided me with correspondence and video clips of Stirlen, and I have consulted The Disciples of Christ Historical Society in Nashville, Tennessee, which has maintained a file on Stirlen.

I also visited the Shenandoah Public Library where microfilms of *The Shenandoah Sentinel/Evening Sentinel* are available. I located articles mentioned in other documents and scanned the newspapers for articles pertaining to Stirlen and the stations. Limited editions of the *Shenandoah Gazette* are also available at the State Historical Society of Iowa in Iowa City, and were also examined for similar articles.

Although this project is primarily based on archival records, family members, radio employees, and other Iowans interviewed were able to confirm or clarify unclear information found within the documents. Moreover, discussions helped to address matters such as Stirlen's first marriage, which was never written about by Stirlen or others. Initial interviews were conducted with Stirlen's granddaughters, Suzanne Boyde and Cynthia Samuel, who both currently reside in Shenandoah. In addition to multiple conversations with Boyde, she allowed me to review a personal collection of published and unpublished records and relics maintained by her mother, who was responsible for donating Stirlen's papers to the Iowa Women's Archives in 1994. Additional letters were also provided by another Stirlen granddaughter, Martha Wells of Box Elder, South Dakota. I also interviewed Thomas E. Beavers, a KMA employee and member of the First Christian Church, and Benetta Guilford, a friend of Stirlen's daughters and a First Christian member.

At the outset of my analysis of the research materials, I constructed a timeline of Stirlen's life and ministry in addition to constructing a timeline of the key moments in broadcast history, especially those that impacted rural stations and religious broadcasting. Once these pivotal moments were outlined, I placed the two side by side in an effort to recognize the moments of tension that existed. After those periods of tension were identified, I began what was occurring with Stirlen and her community. Although the research questions that guided each chapter were at the fore, one of the key questions that guided my entry into the data is, How does this develop, maintain, or disrupt the imagined radio church?

CHAPTER 4

RADIO AND A WOMAN'S WORTH

For Stirlen and her contemporaries who entered the field of radio as newscasters, entertainers, or homemakers, radio offered unlimited possibilities because the medium was so new the industry did not have the luxury of discriminating against women who were barred from other industries during the beginning of the century. The new industry needed available personalities and voices to develop programming as well as female ears to establish its listening audience for daytime programming.

Histories have not accounted for the young women who were amateur radio operators drawn to the medium by the same qualities that drew men. Training as hobbyist was helpful for the women who became ham operators during the war when the U.S. Navy needed women to work as wireless operators to replace the men whose skills were needed on war ships. However, commercial broadcasting became a natural place for women, as the new medium needed whoever was available to develop new programming and assist with the technological operations of stations.

For example, young women like Lois Crawford of Boone, Iowa, eventually made radio history because her father needed someone with a First Class Radio Operator's License to run KFGQ, which aired religious broadcasting from his church.¹⁵⁰ Lois was not interested in the station that was licensed on January 25, 1927. However, she soon realized the male student her father hired from Iowa State University could not keep the transmitter going.¹⁵¹ She solved the family's problems by, after two attempts at the test

¹⁵⁰ Mark Ward, *Music in the Air: The Golden Age of Gospel Radio* (Greenville, SC: Ambassador Emerald International, 2005), 21-23.

¹⁵¹ *Ibid.*, 22.

that was administered in Chicago, becoming the first woman to earn a First Class Radio Operator's License.¹⁵² Crawford remained in Boone and followed in her father's footsteps by becoming a religious broadcaster. In 1977, she was listed as the president of KFGQ and inducted in the National Religious Broadcasters' Religious Broadcasting Hall of Fame.¹⁵³

Radio was first considered a marginal, innovative, and local entity, thus the medium was a less threatening avenue for employment than the more conservative, established professions. Women like Chicago's Bertha Brainard, an ambulance driver in WWI, entered the radio industry on what Michelle Hilmes called the "ground floor."¹⁵⁴ In 1922, Brainard became WJZ's first program director while the industry was in its infancy.¹⁵⁵

Women were present on air as announcers, homemakers, and singers at radio's introduction to the masses as a commercial medium. Historian George H. Douglas noted that in the 1920s a "fair number" of women were on air as announcers, a pivotal position within early radio programming."¹⁵⁶ Cultural historian Michele Hilmes explains that the announcer was the "most prominent figure early radio" and was often responsible for providing news and sports coverage, introductions, and voice-overs for program sponsors.¹⁵⁷ Brainard and others initially started on stations as announcers, a position

¹⁵² Ibid., 23.

¹⁵³ Armstrong, *The Electric Church*, 185.

¹⁵⁴ Ibid., 44.

¹⁵⁵ Ibid., 45.

¹⁵⁶ George H. Douglas, *The Early Days of Radio Broadcasting* (Jefferson, NC: McFarland, 1987), 65.

¹⁵⁷ Hilmes, *Radio Voices*, 141.

that was considered the glue that held the programming together. Ironically, the emergence of commercial radio coincided with the passage of the Nineteenth Amendment, which provided women the right to vote. However, women in radio did not experience the same liberation; female announcers disappeared during the 1930s and 1940s as hiring standards and qualifications changed.¹⁵⁸ Douglas asserted that the debate on women's voices also influenced the hiring of women. The debate, which lasted two decades, began in 1924 after a fan journal published a commentary questioning the "suitability of women as radio announcers."¹⁵⁹ A phonograph record dealer had written in that record sales were declining because the voice of a woman was "undesirable" and "displeasing."¹⁶⁰ The debate remained alive on the pages of *Radio Broadcast* before the female writer in charge of the section of the journal ended the discourse between station managers and directors by publishing a feature on women on the air as announcers.¹⁶¹ Around 1936 Hadley Cantril of Columbia University and Gordon W. Allport of Harvard University published a study on "sex differences in radio voices."¹⁶² The study, which included 80 female and male listeners, found that 95 percent of the respondents preferred male announcers. The participants were also asked to rate five male and five female speakers on voice characteristics, and they concluded they would rather hear a male voice. The researchers postulated that "prejudice" was the reason for the opinion, as

¹⁵⁸ Douglas, *The Early Days of Radio Broadcasting*, 65.

¹⁵⁹ Hilmes, *Radio Voices*, 141.

¹⁶⁰ *Ibid.*, 141-142.

¹⁶¹ *Ibid.*, 142.

¹⁶² Teachers College, Columbia University. "Radio Listeners Prefer Men as Announcers." *Teachers College Record* 37 (5): 461.

almost none of the participants could explain the difference in vocal appeal. The report suggested: “Men were judged to be more natural and more persuasive than women, while women’s voices were usually judged more attractive.”¹⁶³

Douglas concluded that while the issue may have impacted the decrease in the hiring of women announcers, men simply realized how lucrative the profession was and took “all the spoils for themselves.”¹⁶⁴ Hilmes suggested that the debate threatened the careers of women such as Judith Carey Waller of Chicago, one of those female announcers. Both Stirlen’s and Waller’s careers in radio outlasted the argument.

As time progressed, fewer women were heard as announcers and women continued to be criticized and cited for being too chatty or exuberant on air. “Were women desirable on radio?” was a question posed in the pages of *Radio Broadcast* magazine. A phonograph record dealer suggested that women’s voices, particularly the pitch, did not come across well over radio.¹⁶⁵ These stereotypes were soon disproved, as women were needed and they contributed in various ways and made significant contributions such as developing radio news.

Contradictions of Womanhood

Contradictions about national identity and womanhood abounded in the 1930s. Women were in conflict with themselves and with the world around them. “Change was often a matter of two steps forward and one step backward,” explained Historian Glenda

¹⁶³ Ibid.

¹⁶⁴ Ibid.

¹⁶⁵ Jennie Irene Mix, “The Listeners’ Point of View,” *Radio Broadcast*, September 1924, 391.

Riley about the experiences of women.¹⁶⁶ Riley reported that in the 1930s women's interest in their appearance increased, and the evidence to prove it was the \$2 billion spent one year on cosmetics. These products could assist women in expressing the beauty and femininity defined by Hollywood. Farm and urban women wanted to be as sensual as Bette Davis, Greta Garbo, and Mae West. Riley contended that what women were seeing on movie screens of the 1930s contradicted the reality of their lives.

The women viewing Betty Davis, Greta Garbo, and May West did not have the time or energy to decide what to wear on their next date. These women patched their clothes, fed their children day-old bread, and challenged the sexism of the workforce. Riley explained that while divorce rates soared in the 1920s, in the 1930s women made unhappy marriages work, chose not to get married, or determined to suspend reproduction because of the costs of caring for children.¹⁶⁷ Women worked various aspects of industry in the 1930s; however, female workers often worked long hours under the abusive treatment by employers. Although many married women worked to support their families, their industriousness was met with resentment as they encountered opposition for being female and married. Proverbially speaking, they were damned if they did work and damned if they did not. Some thought it was the man's responsibility to take care of his home, thus, the men needed all of available jobs. This mindset evolved into federal legislation in the form of the Economic Act of 1933, which stipulated that no two members of one household could work for the federal government. Although female activists protested this measure, state governments would soon enact similar legislation.

¹⁶⁶ Glenda Riley, *Inventing the American Woman: A Perspective on Women's History* (Arlington Heights, IL: Harlan Davidson, 1986), 212.

¹⁶⁷ *Ibid.*, 212-213.

Moreover, while women fought to maintain jobs in nontraditional sectors, they had to fight to protect the job traditionally considered women's work: teaching. Riley contended that when men could not find work during the depression, they began to seek teaching positions which subsequently led to the displacement of females in the classroom and in teacher training programs.¹⁶⁸ With the introduction of unionization in 1933, women were hopeful that they could fight to protect and secure employment. However, unionization was not the answer to fair and equal employment for women, who were prohibited from joining certain shops or were isolated in gender-specific units.

Taking Over the Mic

Female characters in radio fractured the glass ceilings while their fans were still hitting their heads and experiencing repercussions from men whose spirits and masculinity were wounded by their inability to take care of their families because of the lack of jobs during the Great Depression.

Women in 1930s daytime serials were portrayed in realistic societal characterizations in programs like *The Goldbergs* and *Clara, Lu and Em*.¹⁶⁹ Gertrude Berg, author and actress of the Goldbergs, was said to have established a believable Jewish family for viewers, which was important as the nation became a melting pot and radio was used to create American identity and help citizens understand their new neighbors.¹⁷⁰ While many soap operas featured women as principle characters, there was a backlash for male characters, such as Jack Benny, who were presented as vulnerable

¹⁶⁸ Ibid., 214-215.

¹⁶⁹ Fred MacDonal. *Don't Touch that Dial: Radio Programming in American Life, 1920-1960* (Chicago: Nelson-Hall, 1979) [include page].

¹⁷⁰ Ibid.

and lacking courage.¹⁷¹ The woman on air and behind the mic were courageous, and that courage often translated in to financial benefits for both their families and the male radio station owners and managers who realized their potential to draw dedicated listeners to their programming.

While women like Leanna Driftmier, a sister of radio station owner Henry Field, owned shares of the farmer station, very little has been written on how radio allowed rural women like Driftmier to begin entrepreneurial exploits. For example, histories about the lives of women often end with marriage, wifedom, or motherhood; however, this is not how Stirlen's story played out in reality or will play out within this work.¹⁷²

Early Years of Edythe May Elem

Born Edythe Mary Elem on March 31, 1895, in Cimarron, Kansas, Stirlen recounted that she had a very lonely childhood, as her mother died when she was seven years old. The youngest of seven children, she saw her siblings "parceled out here and there" while she remained with her father on the family's farm.¹⁷³ The family moved to Sylvia, Kansas, where Stirlen spent her freshman year of high school and accepted Jesus Christ as her Savior after being persuaded by a friend named Pearl.¹⁷⁴ As a teenager,

¹⁷¹ See Margaret T. McFadden, "America's Boy Friend Who Can't Get a Date": Gender, Race, and the Cultural Work of the Jack Benny Program, 1932-1946," *Journal of American History* 80, no. 1 (1993): 113-134.

¹⁷² Carolyn G. Heilbrun, *Writing a Woman's Life* (New York: Ballantine Books, 1989), 58.

¹⁷³ Stirlen. *The Little Minister's Devotional Selection*, 2.

¹⁷⁴ "Above are some pictures," *S.O.S. Signal*, January 1938, Box 14, Edythe Stirlen Papers, Iowa Women's Archives, University of Iowa Libraries, Iowa City, Iowa (hereafter cited as Stirlen Papers).

Stirlen sang during revivals, and, although she takes no credit for the result, she noted 45 of her classmates and friends became Christians at one of the meetings.¹⁷⁵

In 1915, at the age of 20, she graduated from Albia High School in Albia, Iowa, while living with her sister, Ella, and her husband, the Rev. C.V. Pearce.¹⁷⁶ After high school, Stirlen taught in northern Iowa at what she refers to as a “Norwegian school” where no one spoke English. After a year there, she found other teaching jobs and pursued studies at Des Moines College, Warrensburg Normal, Kansas University, and other schools “as time and money permitted.”¹⁷⁷

After World War I, Stirlen lived with another one of her sisters in Washington, D.C., where she found work with the U.S. Census Bureau and as a secretary and pastor’s assistant at the Ninth Street Christian Church.¹⁷⁸ While there, she attended a basketball game where one of the players caught her eye.¹⁷⁹ His name was Joseph Ernest Swartz, a native of St. Joseph, Missouri. The two married on August 4, 1920.¹⁸⁰ A scrapbook in the possession of her granddaughter holds pictures of an elegantly dressed young couple photographed at a train station and visibly in love as they visit with family and friends.

¹⁷⁵ Ibid.

¹⁷⁶ According to entries in Stirlen’s high school yearbook (private collection), she attended a different school each of her four high school years.

¹⁷⁷ Stirlen, *The Little Minister’s Devotional Selection*, 3.

¹⁷⁸ Ibid.

¹⁷⁹ Suzanne Boyde, interview with author, May 31, 2007.

¹⁸⁰ Edythe Stirlen obituary, *The Disciple*, March 1988, 50, Edythe Stirlen biographical file, Disciples of Christ Historical Society, Nashville, Tenn.

The couple's first child, Ella Josephine, was born in Washington, D.C.¹⁸¹ Their daughters, Rosalee and Wren, were born after the couple returned to St. Joseph.

Edythe Elem Swartz Enters the Studio

Stirlen attributed her ability to communicate effectively on radio to her early days as an elocution instructor. In 1923, pupils in Mrs. Swartz's School of Expression performed in recitals held at the First Christ Church in Bethany, Missouri.¹⁸² According to family members, Joseph's problems with the law forced her to seek a divorce.¹⁸³ Stirlen does not mention Swartz nor the demise of her union in the ministry materials or sermons produced during her public ministry. She simply recalled, "Those were dark days. I don't like to remember them."¹⁸⁴ Although Stirlen left very few clues about this relationship, a note found in the papers of her granddaughter suggests the two remained cordial and in touch.

She supported her family by teaching public speaking, coaching plays, and working as a paid soloist at the Westminster Presbyterian Church.¹⁸⁵ Stirlen was among a small group of U.S. women who raised families alone and worked outside of the home, a trend that would continue through the Great Depression. According to an 11-city sample taken for the 1920 decennial census, about 15 percent of working women maintained

¹⁸¹ Jo Fischer obituary, *Garden City Telegram*, October 8, 2003.
<http://gctelegram.com/obits/2003/october/8/jfischer.html> (accessed April 7, 2006).

¹⁸² "Expression Recital" flyer, private collection.

¹⁸³ Suzanne Boyde and Cynthia Samuel (Stirlen's granddaughters), interview with author, May 31, 2007.

¹⁸⁴ Stirlen, *The Little Minister's Devotional Selection*, 5.

¹⁸⁵ *Ibid.*

households without men.¹⁸⁶ Moreover, nearly 25 percent of all women and about 29 percent of married women were in the labor force in 1930.¹⁸⁷ At one point after Joseph's departure, Stirlen placed her children in the homes of three different family members while she worked to secure financial stability.¹⁸⁸

KFNF's Prairie Flower

Stirlen dated her entrance into radio back to Mother's Day 1926 when her church group visited KFEQ in St. Joseph, Missouri, and she recited Kipling's "Mother O' Mine." Stirlen explained, "I attribute my long service on the air to that happy selection in which I honored my mother. The poem won some fan mail. Gradually I was pushed more and more into the limelight, until finally, the pastor preached and I sang for all the regular broadcasts of our church."¹⁸⁹

Stirlen relocated to Shenandoah in 1929 and began establishing a foundation at KFNF.¹⁹⁰ Stirlen's bio is included alongside the other KFNF broadcasters in the station's *Guide and Souvenir Book*, which includes this introduction: "Edythe Swartz, popular for her singing, reading and religious lectures. She is also Studio Hostess and is always ready with her contagious smile to welcome you to the studio auditorium and see that you get registered."¹⁹¹

¹⁸⁶ Howard V. Hayghe, "Family Members in the Work Force," *Monthly Labor Review*, March 1990, 15.

¹⁸⁷ *Ibid.*

¹⁸⁸ Suzanne Boyde, interview with author, May 31, 2007.

¹⁸⁹ *Ibid.*, 4.

¹⁹⁰ Birkby, *KMA Radio*, 94.

¹⁹¹ "Guide and Souvenir Book of KFNF," 1929, KFNF File, Greater Shenandoah Historical Society, Shenandoah, Iowa (hereafter cited GSHS).

At KFNF, Stirlen initially served as a station hostess and sang on-air. She eventually became the religious director of KFNF, and recalled that Field prompted her to continue singing and “visit with people, especially about religious matters” after the station received a postcard inquiring about the “shut-in program.”¹⁹² Stirlen became president of the Sunshine Club of KFNF and began to sing and minister to homebound members of the station’s audience.¹⁹³

Social historian Donna Halper suggested that women like Stirlen who were musically talented achieved success in radio and saw it as a new option outside of traditional roles.¹⁹⁴ Moreover, the industry may have equally benefited since these women provided much-needed services and talents the industry and individual stations needed. Halper provides this explanation of how the stations benefited from opening the studio door to musically inclined women:

[T]he reason was not necessarily that early owners believed in feminism. What they believed in was having somebody on the staff who had good contacts with musicians and other performers. Women ran many of the music school’s (another occupation that society considered appropriate for them was that of music teacher or vocal coach), and a number of these women also sang in church choirs or for their local symphony orchestra...Also, it was commonly believed that women were by nature good at organizing, making them ideal for tasks that involved scheduling and arranging the talent.¹⁹⁵

¹⁹² Birkby, *KMA Radio*, 95; Stirlen, *The Little Minister’s Devotional Selection*, 2.

¹⁹³ Edythe Swartz, “Sunshine For Shut-Ins by Edythe Swartz,” *Kitchen Klatter News*, October 1929, Evelyn Birkby Collection of Radio Homemaker Materials, 1919-2001, Iowa Women’s Archives, University of Iowa Libraries, Iowa City, Iowa (hereafter cited as Birkby Papers).

¹⁹⁴ Donna L. Halper, *Invisible Stars: A Social History of Women in American Broadcasting* (Armonk, NY: M.E. Sharpe, 2001), 14.

¹⁹⁵ *Ibid.*

KMA's Little Minister

Earl May, owner of KMA Radio, another farmer station in Shenandoah, Iowa, hired Stirlen in December 1929, only two months after the start of the Depression, to work as the Director of Welfare. The position required her to attend to devotions, weddings, funerals, and other duties as required.¹⁹⁶ Because of the collegiality between the two stations and their owners, Stirlen was able to broadcast on KMA and KFNF. In the 1970s, her radio broadcast was also heard on KDMI in Des Moines and KOAK, a station based in Red Oak, Iowa. However, it was on KMA that Stirlen's *Radio Church of the Air* program and its units created the imagined religious community that recognized Stirlen as their "Little Minister."¹⁹⁷

For Stirlen, the summer of 1930 was a period filled with activity and transitions that would forever change the course of her life. She was ordained on May 26, 1930; began broadcasting on KMA in June; and then married Carl J. Stirlen, a Montgomery Ward salesman, on July 16, 1930. Stirlen reunited with her daughters at some point in that same year.

The Little Minister's Theology

Growing up, Stirlen worshipped in churches affiliated with the Christian Church (Disciples of Christ), one of the more liberal sects of the organization that allowed the ordination of women,¹⁹⁸ and lived in the home of her brother-in-law and one of the organization's ministers, the Rev. C.V. Pearce. Stirlen did not doubt her ability to spread

¹⁹⁶ Edythe Stirlen, "Something About My Life and Work," S.O.S. Signal, June/July 1962, 19; Box 14, Stirlen Papers.

¹⁹⁷ It is unclear how Stirlen began to be known by this moniker, but her grandchildren suggests the name derived from her petite stature.

¹⁹⁸ Philpott, discussion.

the gospel; rather, she had no role models to present this as an option. She wrote in her 1978 biography: “Had I been a boy instead of a girl I am sure I would have been preaching the gospel long before I did. However, having been brought up to think preaching was a man’s job I did not aspire to be a Minister [sic] of the gospel.”¹⁹⁹

Stirlen was ordained by the Rev. Frank R. Gillihan, who was the pastor of the First Christian Church of Burlington Junction, Missouri, from 1928 to 1929.²⁰⁰ She knew Gillihan from the Kings Hill Christian Church in St. Joseph, where he pastored in 1926²⁰¹ and where she served as staff soloist.²⁰² Stirlen, who later assisted in the ordination of others, viewed ordination as more than receiving authority; rather, she viewed the designation as being called to service and submitting to God’s will. Instead of ordination being something used to garner attention, Stirlen believed those who were called to ministry should respond:

Here I am a servant of God. I mean to make that the supreme interest and aim in my life. I am your servant. Call upon me. I will come pray with you. I will try to help you find salvation. I will try to comfort you in dying. Ask me to help you and your troubles. When the world turns you down, come to me, and I will love

¹⁹⁹ Rev. Edythe Stirlen, *From the Land of the Tumbleweed* (Council Bluffs, Iowa: McDonald-Slater Publishing, 1978), 76.

²⁰⁰ Christian Warren, “Early radio ministers had local origins,” *Shenandoah Evening Sentinel*, April 2, 1986. Pastor Matt Limback, e-mail message to author, February 5, 2008; At the time of Stirlen’s ordination, the local church, or a lone pastor, was the final authority in the matter of ordination, as the Disciples of Christ functioned did not operate as a denomination. The collection of churches were united by a common belief and considered a “brotherhood.” While women were ordained by the organization beginning in the mid-1800s, documents discussing the matter only reference “the brethren.” The Disciples of Christ Historical Society in Nashville, Tennessee, maintains an Edythe Stirlen file, and the organization recognized her within ministry publications during her lifetime. See the *Encyclopedia of the Stone-Campbell Movement*, eds. Douglas A. Foster, Anthony L. Dunnivant, Paul M. Blowers, and D. Newell Williams (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans Publishing, 2005).

²⁰¹ Elaine Philpott (curator, Disciples of Christ Historical Society, Nashville, TN), in discussion with author, August 26, 2008.

²⁰² “Rev. Edythe Stirlen, 92, dies funeral rites to be Monday,” *Shenandoah Evening Sentinel*, September 18, 1987, 3.

you, and try to help you – in sickness or health – ordination means – not that you want to usurp authority over someone – but rather take the forms of a servant.²⁰³

The Disciples of Christ, which is also known as the Christian Church, viewed ordination as the “proper recognition of worthiness of men dedicated to preaching and pastoral work.”²⁰⁴ As expected, documents from the Disciples of Christ Historical Society referencing ordination during the early 1900s referenced “men” and “brothers” joining the “brotherhood.” The Stone-Campbell movement, which the Disciples were birthed out of, recognized women in the ministry as early as 1888.²⁰⁵ However, the Disciples continued to debate the ordination of women as well as ordination in general until the 1970s. In addition to the age-old debate on whether the Bible authorized the ordination of women, a review of Disciples’ literature suggests that ordination in general was debated as congregants and leaders questioned whether academic training was necessary, whether churches had to acknowledge ministers ordained by other churches, and whether ordination should even be permitted at the local level. No uniformity in ordination existed for much of the twentieth century.

A Woman’s Gift Maketh Room For Her

According to Stirlen, KFNF-owner Field, a member of the Methodist church in Shenandoah and a religious man, made the recommendation upon witnessing her spiritual gifts. “Mr. Field encouraged your Radio Pastor to become an ordained minister. In what degree I have succeeded is for you and him to decide,” she wrote in the March 1949 issue of the *Signal*. In a sermon broadcasted in the 1940s, Stirlen told her audience: “I was

²⁰³ Edythe Stirlen, Sermon #12 “Come Ye after me and I will make you fishers of men,” Folder Sermons 1940-1942 Vol. 3, Box 3, Stirlen Papers.

²⁰⁴ “Ordination,” *The Christian-Evangelist*, June 16, 1938. Disciples of Christ Historical Society. Nashville, TN.

²⁰⁵ *The Encyclopedia of the Stone-Campbell Movement*, s.v. “Women in Ministry.”

ordained for the preaching of the Gospel... [M]y ministry has been the greatest joy of my life, and I want to preach with my dying breath.²⁰⁶

As a novice KFNF broadcaster, she was known for singing “old ballads and spirituals” but as her radio program developed, she “grew bolder and talked more about the Lord and His love.”²⁰⁷ Some listeners did not embrace the shift in programming and thought she had “ruined” her program by incorporating the preached word. She writes that listeners advised via letters: “We can hear preachers any place but no one can sing the old songs like you.”²⁰⁸ While saddened by the disapproval of some of her audience members, she listened to the still small voice that instructed her to preach the Gospel. Stirlen did not just want to entertain her audience; rather, she wanted them to experience the manifest presence of God. She advised: “[T]his is not a program. It is just a little time of worship—in your home and my home. Not a show - but a time alone - you and I - at your house and my house—with God and with His holy word.”²⁰⁹

Although she was associated with the Christian Church (Disciples of Christ), she explained to radio congregants that the KMA Radio Church was ecumenical. “We have no creed but the Bible. Our only requirement for membership is daily Bible reading and prayer,” Stirlen wrote.²¹⁰ News reports and family accounts also suggested that Stirlen operated in an ecumenical spirit by making her rounds to preach and worship with

²⁰⁶ “Let the redeemed of the Lord say so,” Folder Stirlen; Radio broadcasts, Sermons 1940-1941 Volume 3, Box 3, Stirlen Papers.

²⁰⁷ Edythe Stirlen, “Time Marches On,” *S.O.S. Signal*, September 1942, Box 14, Stirlen Papers.

²⁰⁸ *Ibid.*

²⁰⁹ Stirlen, “Our First Broadcast At 1:15 p.m. June 1,” *S.O.S. Signal*, July 1942, Box 14, Stirlen Papers.

²¹⁰ Stirlen to “Dear Friend,” n.d., private collection.

various congregations within the Shenandoah and Page County community. Stirlen's grandchildren also recall traveling with her to nursing homes and mental health facilities where she ministered to people.²¹¹ In 1932, she began to share her ministry through the pages of *Cappers Weekly*, a farm magazine that published a series of her sermons.

Stirlen was an active member of the First Christian Church of Shenandoah and served as a teacher and the superintendent of the Sunday School. She gave sermons in the absence of the pastor. However, one member recalls that over the years, not all of the First Christian pastors recognized Stirlen as an ordained minister. Bennetta Guilford of Shenandoah, a church member and friend of Stirlen's daughters, recalls that in the 1950s one pastor refused to recognize her ordination because she had no formal theological training.²¹² Guilford noted that Stirlen was "one of the best Bible teachers" and recalled that church members did not have issues with Stirlen as a female minister. Documents in the Stirlen Papers further confirm Stirlen fellowshiped and received invitations to preach from other congregations.

Stirlen as Servant Leader

Stirlen was also very active in the Shenandoah community and served as president of the local Woman's Christian Temperance Union (WCTU). She was also a member of several fraternal organizations including the Eastern Star, White Shrine of Jerusalem, and the Social Order of the Beauceant. Her local club affiliation included the Altrusa Club, which she presided over in 1960, and the Nautilus Club, which she served as president in

²¹¹ Boyde, interview with author, May 31, 2007.

²¹² Benetta Guilford, interview with the author, September 20, 2007, Shenandoah, Iowa.

the 1940s.²¹³ Stirlen described the latter as an organization that did Red Cross work and studied to see how they could be of service to their community, state, and nation.²¹⁴ She was also an active member of the Hospital Auxiliary.²¹⁵

In undated notes Stirlen prepared for an interview, she wrote, “omit reference to Eastern Star etc for some religious people are opposed to secret orders [sic].” Although such involvement may have concerned some of her radio associates, her various activities provided additional ministry opportunities, such as serving as the state director of the Evangelistic Department of the WCTU and Supreme Chaplain for the Supreme Assembly of the Social Order of the Beauceant.²¹⁶

Stirlen’s distinction as a member of the clergy did not keep her from participating in what was considered the woman’s work of the church, which included groups like the Christian Women’s Fellowship. While the organization evolved from a Ladies’ Aid society to an international organization, the original goal was for women at the local level to organize around worship, study, and service as they developed “all women in Christian living and Christian service.”²¹⁷ She was also a member of the American Association of Women Ministers.

²¹³ “Edythe Stirlen President of Altrusa Club,” publication unknown, June 29, 1960, private collection; Edythe Stirlen, Sermon #52 Father’s Day Sermon, Folder Sermons 1940-1941 Vol. 3, Box 3, Stirlen Papers.

²¹⁴ Edythe Stirlen, Sermon #52 Father’s Day Sermon, Folder Sermons 1940-1941 Vol. 3, Box 3, Stirlen Papers.

²¹⁵ “Books presented to library by the Rev. Edythe Stirlen,” *Shenandoah Evening Sentinel*, February 16, 1979, 2.

²¹⁶ (Mrs. John B.) Gertrude M. Blue to Mrs. Carl Stirlen, April 17, 1967. Edythe Stirlen File, GSHS.

²¹⁷ Lorraine Lollis, *The Shape of Adam's Rib: A Lively History of Women's Work in the Christian Church* (Bloomington, MN: Bethany Press, 1970), 144.

From 1930 to 1942, Stirlen was an employee of the May Seed Co., a separate entity from the broadcasting company. Stirlen explained the arrangement was created to prevent the station from breaking the law of preaching doctrine. “When one is hired by a radio station they must NOT preach DOCTRINE of any kind,” she explained to the *Signal*’s readers.²¹⁸

Stirlen did not specifically preach the doctrine of the Christian Church; rather, she used the teachings of the Disciples of Christ to inform the gospel that she preached on air. The flexibility of the denomination’s organizational structure on the local level may have also provided her the framework from which to establish her own Radio Church of the Air.

²¹⁸ Edythe Stirlen, “These Changing Times,” *S.O.S. Signal*, February 1943, Box 14, Stirlen Papers.

CHAPTER 5
THE SHENANDOAH FARM STATIONS, ITS OWNERS
AND THEIR HOMEGROWN IMAGINED COMMUNITY

The Rev. Edythe Swartz Stirlen's entry into radio was not dependent on submitting a resume or tape; rather, her radio career was the result of a leisurely visit to the radio studio where visitors from across the region came to confirm if what they heard on the radio was actually taking place. When Stirlen and a church group traveled to Shenandoah, Iowa, to get a glimpse at this new phenomenon called radio production, they may have never imagined that the visit would jumpstart someone's career.

In 1929, the year in which Stirlen visited, KFNF "pinned over a half million badges on visitors."²¹⁹ The Friendly Farmer Station attracted nearly 3,000 to 5,000 visitors a day, and the activity taking place outside the studio invigorated the otherwise sleepy farming town. The noise, however, did not drown out a station employee who came out asking if anyone among the visitors had a talent he or she wanted to share on-air. "She does," Stirlen recounted her friends screaming before she accepted the invitation into the Shenandoah studio. At first, she was reluctant, but there was no reason for her to be afraid, as she had sung on radio before. The 34-year-old mother of three sang an old song already in her musical arsenal, "Everybody Talkin' About Heaven Ain't Going."²²⁰ The number was well received and she sang another.

Stirlen's encounter in the studio that day could have easily equated to a mere 15 minutes of fame, but that day was actually the beginning of a radio career that lasted for 52 years. What were the contributing factors that contributed to this single mother's early

²¹⁹ "Guide and Souvenir Book of KFNF," 1929. KFNF File, GSHS.

²²⁰ "Nadine Dreagers Golden Age of Radio Reunion 1984," DVD, provided by Nadine Dreagers.

success in radio is a question at the fore of the project, yet it can only be probed after a clear understanding of the environment in which her career existed. Thus, providing an understanding of what prepared the way for Stirlen and her imagined religious community.

This chapter examines the environment in which Stirlen's *Radio Church of the Air* evolved into in an effort to layout the cultural and political culture in which farm radio developed. The following questions guided this inquiry: Who were the men behind the farmer stations and how did they create their enterprises? How did the farmer stations stay financially viable in the midst of corporate competition? How did the stations use the homegrown talent within its community? What tactics did the stations use to create an imagined community of listeners?

Shenandoah:

“Seed and Nursery Center of the World”²²¹

Since Shenandoah's founding in 1870, residents found the 5,000 acres of growing field to be profitable and the town became known as the Seed and Nursery Center of the World.²²² Although the explanation about the quality and location of the land helps one understand why Shenandoah garnered that title, cultural historian Clifford J. Doerksen suggests there is no explanation for why the town became “an epicenter of early American broadcasting.”²²³ The seed-house owners kept things interesting in the quaint and quiet southwestern Iowa town, as their on-air antics affected the community in both

²²¹ Elaine F. Danforth, “The History of Shenandoah, Iowa,” *Annals of Iowa* 40, no. 7 (Winter 1971): 519.

²²² Ibid.

²²³ Clifford J. Doerksen, *American Babel: Rogue Radio Broadcasters of the Jazz Age* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2005), 77.

positive and negative ways. “The [r]adio [s]tations brought a cosmopolitan atmosphere to Shenandoah that I am sure was not felt in towns many times larger. For Shenandoah was a mecca for farmers in at least four states and they came to see what the stations, and these people were all about,” wrote Gordon Hayzlett, whose parents Jay and Gertrude worked for the Henry Field Seed Company.²²⁴

“Shenandoah was a community accustomed to organized celebrations,” wrote KMA biographer Robert Birkby.²²⁵ “At the Henry Field Seed Company, the KFNF second anniversary celebration attracted 10,000 out-of-town guests to enjoy studio tours, free food, the performances of over a hundred old-time fiddlers, and thirty-six straight hours of radio broadcasts.”²²⁶ In 1925, Field created the event to thank his new radio listeners and introduce them to his wares. The oftentimes days-long jubilees and the on-air antics of the two radio stations owners earned them a comparison to P.T. Barnum, an accomplished showman and entrepreneur, while other historians have labeled them “high profile, intense men.”²²⁷ No matter the monikers, the two men impacted not only the local but also the national radio industry by showcasing Midwestern talent, which helped to diversify offerings available to listeners.

Henry Field and KFNF: The Friendly Farmer Station

“[Henry Field] is an example of American citizenship with a successful business career to his credit, attained by hard work, and Golden Rule business methods.”

Rev. James Pearson (“Newsboy”), Radio Thoughts, November 1927

²²⁴ Gordon Hayzlett, “Remembrances of KFNF,” n.d., KFNF File, GSHS.

²²⁵ Robert Birkby, *KMA Radio*, 35.

²²⁶ Ibid.

²²⁷ Doll, *Sparks out of the Plowed Ground*, 10.

By June 1922, the Department of Commerce had licensed 10 stations to operate in Iowa, one of which was operated by a Shenandoah enthusiast, Harlan Gass, who operated the 100-watt WGAJ.²²⁸ By the fall of 1923, the opportunity to broadcast presented itself to Henry Field. According to Field's sister and biographer, Francis Hope Field, it was not long before Field recognized the marketing power the new commercial medium presented and its potential impact on his seed house.²²⁹ He and his workers ventured to WOAW in Omaha, Nebraska, where they used their airtime to talk about Shenandoah.²³⁰ Their Shenandoah neighbors listened in that night, and it was only a matter of months before Field began broadcasting independently from the third-floor of his Shenandoah nursery building. Rural stations offered great promise, as radio developers envisioned the medium would connect isolated residents with the rest of the world.²³¹ KFNF, "the Friendly Farmer Station," was birthed on February 20, 1924. It was not long before the station became a regional favorite and a welcomed treat for distant listeners when the station's signal crept out of its assigned wave.

Farmer stations like KFNF had a unique niche and a pool of talent network stations could not provide or manufacture. Doerksen provided the following analysis of Field's station: "Unlike city stations, which strove to distance themselves from the taint of amateurism, KFNF proudly advertised the fact that its most popular female vocalist, LuEtta Minnick Armstrong, was the office assistant to company treasurer Fred

²²⁸ Robert Birkby, *KMA Radio*, 6.

²²⁹ Frances Hope Field. *The Story of Henry Field*. (Production by William & Jean Pavek: 1994). Located at the Shenandoah Public Library.

²³⁰ Robert Birkby, *KMA Radio*, 8.

²³¹ Craig, Steve, "'The Farmer's Friend': Radio Comes to America, 1920-1927," *Journal of Radio Studies* 8, no. 2 (2001): 331.

Tunncliff, who was familiar to listeners as the announcer of KFNF Sunday night devotional services.”²³²

Field, a native of Shenandoah, found initial success in the seed business and became “a national figure” in the area of agriculture and horticulture.²³³ By 1899, he began writing and printing the *Seed Sense* catalogue to expand his business.²³⁴ The publication, which was described as “newsy” and noted for its “honesty, folksy charm,” was distributed initially distributed throughout the Midwest.²³⁵ In 1902, Field built the first seed house and continually expanded the edifice.²³⁶ The physical building, however, was not the only thing that would expand.

When Field celebrated the station’s second anniversary, the *New York Times* and local Shenandoah newspaper took note of the number of telegrams the station received during its 30-hour continuous broadcast, substantiating the station’s popularity. KFNF received 225,899 telegrams during the broadcast which featured 8 orchestras, 15 male quartets, and a contest featuring 120 old-time fiddlers and other entertainers and speakers.²³⁷

KFNF had its own studio orchestra to supply live music as well as standby musicians, such as fiddler Wilbur Smith, who provided old-time music.²³⁸ The jazz

²³² Doerksen, *American Babel*, 79.

²³³ Leanna Driftmier. “Henry Field 1871-1949,” *Kitchen Klatter Magazine*, November 1949, 3. Henry Field Papers, State Historical Society of Iowa, Iowa City (hereafter cited Field Papers).

²³⁴ Author unknown. “The Story of Henry Field’s,” n.d., 1. KFNF File, GSHS.

²³⁵ Birkby, *KMA Radio*, 4; Birkby was commissioned by the station to write its history.

²³⁶ Author unknown. “The Story of Henry Field’s,” n.d., 2, KFNF File, GSHS.

²³⁷ “KFNF Makes Record: Gets 225,899 Telegrams,” *New York Times*, March 21, 1926, XX21.

²³⁸ Henry Field Seed Company, “Studio and Broadcasting Station KFNF,” 26. KFNF File, GSHS.

music that had become popular on city stations did not fare well for their listeners who enjoyed music more reminiscent of early times and consistent with the Midwestern ethos, music like the prairie songs sung by Stirlen. After reviewing the content of early rural publications, Communication Arts professor Randal Patnode concluded: “Radio advertising promised to redeem the farmer by raising his social status to equal that of the city dweller – and an idealized city dweller at that.”²³⁹ For Iowa farmers, going to town may have meant a trip to Des Moines or even to Shenandoah, where Field offered seed for the garden as well as clothing for the farmer. Doerksen explained, “The simplicity of KFNF’s economic plan was complemented by an equally straightforward musical policy rooted in barn dance music and gospel hymns.”²⁴⁰

With few advertisers to sponsor the station’s content, Field and Earl May self-financed their own business ventures by promoting their products within their station’s regular programming. During his twice-a-day radio appearances, Field answered listeners’ gardening questions while touting the benefits and value of the offerings in his seed house. His famed “Letter Basket” program not only provided the opportunity to create the necessary images of communion for his community, but also to hawk peaches, tires, or whatever product that had arrived during the week.

One writer in the 1930s identified the station as “the most loved and the most hated broadcasting station in the country.”²⁴¹ While organizations such as the Des Moines-based Iowa Radio Listeners’ League were critical of Field and his competitor

²³⁹ Randall Patnode, “‘What These People Need is Radio’: New Technology, the Press, and Otherness in 1920s America,” *Society for the History of Technology*, 2003, 293.

²⁴⁰ Doerksen, *American Babel*, 79.

²⁴¹ Wayne Gard, “Henry Field of Iowa,” *Plain Talk*, 607-612, Folder 1, Box 7, Field Papers.

Earl May because of their direct selling tactics, farmers and radio listeners loved Field, his station, and the people who entertained them.²⁴² In addition to the seed store, Field also owned a gas station, hatchery, and was credited with developing “mule corn.”²⁴³ The Field complex also housed the office of an optometrist, a photo studio, and a print shop that produced *Seed Sense* and other company documents.²⁴⁴ Field also operated a department store with clothing for the entire family, shoes, hardware, tropical fish and birds, books, fabric and notions, a campground with 73 cabins, and a zoo that housed monkeys and a bear.²⁴⁵ In 1927, Field announced the construction of the KFNF auditorium, which doubled as a studio able to accommodate the large crowds that journeyed to Shenandoah to meet their favorite on-air personalities and witness the magic of radio.²⁴⁶ These visitors represented the larger imagined community from which Stirlen’s community developed. Only a few years later, crowds of listeners would come specifically to visit Stirlen and fellowship with her *Radio Church of the Air*.

Listening in at KFNF

Field wanted visitors to experience Shenandoah and his store provided Shenandoah maps when they arrived so they could explore other locations, especially ones significant to Field, such as the Sleepy Hollow farm where Field started his

²⁴² The Des Moines-based league was started in the late 1920s and was led by Francis St. Austell. Other members included Joel Tuttle; secretary of the Chamber of Commerce, Ed O’Dea; W.H. Heinz, the manager of Iowa’s first radio station which was owned by Bankers Life, WHO; and Hugh B. Lee of the Register and The Tribune-Capital. See “Plan National Radio Listeners Sessions Here,” *The Des Moines Register*, January 12, 1928, 11.

²⁴³ Author unknown. “The Story of Henry Field’s,” n.d. KFNF File, GSHS.

²⁴⁴ Gordon Hayzlett, “Remembrances of KFNF,” n.d., 2. KFNF File, GSHS; *Guide and Souvenir Book of KFNF*, 1929. Henry Field File, GSHS.

²⁴⁵ *Guide and Souvenir Book of KFNF*, 1929. Henry Field File, GSHS.

²⁴⁶ Robert Birkby, *KMA Radio*, 41.

business. The radio station visitors were instrumental to the social life as well as the overall economy of Shenandoah and information about visitors was recorded in the *Seed House Gossip* column that appeared in the local newspaper. During the summer of 1927, 165,000 KFNF visitors were “received with a glad hand.”²⁴⁷ In his 1929 *KFNF Guide and Souvenir Book*, Field advised: “Don’t be afraid to ask anyone around the Seed House anything you want to know...So while you are at KFNF the place is yours. Make yourself at home. Go where you like, and don’t be afraid to ask questions. We have no secrets and no private places so you can feel free to come and go as you like and feel at home.”²⁴⁸

KFNF programs used colloquial language common to farm families and rural dwellers who envisioned Henry as a friend they could trust. In the midst of the direct sales controversy, one southeast Iowa listener wrote in to *The Des Moines Register* to condemn the station for the informal nature of a program and its use of “mispronounced words, incorrect English and billingsgate.”²⁴⁹ Albert Haldeman wrote that the recent Christmas day broadcast sounded like one big Field family gathering, and posed the question: “How can we expect our children to speak good English after listening to this nonsense from radio.”²⁵⁰ Field was no unlearned country bumpkin, and the style used on the station was just another way to connect with listeners, who were disconnected from those highfalutin stations on the East Coast. The son of an educator and member of the Iowa State Legislature, Henry worked as a page in the Iowa Legislature before attending the Western Normal College in Shenandoah where he matriculated until the school

²⁴⁷ James Pearson, *Radio Thoughts*, November 1927, 1. KFNF File, GSHS.

²⁴⁸ “Some of the Folks You Hear Over KFNF.” *Guide and Souvenir Book of KFNF*, 1929. Henry Field File, GSHS.

²⁴⁹ Albert Haldeman, “Radio English,” *The Des Moines Register*, January 4, 1928, 4.

²⁵⁰ *Ibid.*

burned down in 1891.²⁵¹ He worked as a county surveyor and taught country school for three winters before pursuing his first love: gardening.

What Haldeman considered nonsense, Field equated to profit as he and his seed house folks pitched everything in the store's arsenal via the radio station. Field believed that the power of radio advertising is what drew crowds to Shenandoah, and, as a master salesman, he convinced prospective radio advertisers that they could also experience the powerful effects of radio advertising. In a 1928 pitch letter to prospective advertisers, Field wrote:

[P]eople by hundreds of thousands, yes millions of people now listen to their Radio instead of Reading their papers so much. This shows why Radio advertising is producing such surprising results and why hundreds of concerns are spending more and more money for Radio Advertising each year and less for Newspaper and Farm Paper space. Results at the lowest cost are what you want and KFNF is proving its power in molding and swaying the minds of the people of the great middle west—Iowa, Nebraska, Kansas, Missouri, Minnesota and Western Illinois, besides overlapping territory in several other states.²⁵²

Cost saving may have also factored into Field's decision to recruit and nurture local radio talent instead of hiring a celebrity or more-established personalities as some larger, more cosmopolitan stations did. For Field, radio was a family affair and his initial radio staff included his third wife, Bertha Mitchell; his oldest child, Frank; youngest daughter, Celeste; and his sisters Leanna Field Driftmier, Helen Field Fischer, and Jessie Field Fischer. The sisters together hosted *The Mother's Hour* program; Leanna went on to host the *Kitchen Klatter* homemaker program, helping mothers and homemakers; Helen gave sermonettes on Sunday and was the official landscape advisor who gave

²⁵¹ "Henry Field," 1943. KFNF File, GSHS.

²⁵² Henry Field to Gentlemen, 27 June 1928. Box 5, Folder 4, Henry Field Collection. State Historical Society of Iowa, Iowa City.

gardening advice; and Jessie discussed the care and training of children.²⁵³ Frank, Henry's oldest child, was an announcer and the manager of the Nursery Department.²⁵⁴ Field's clan along with local broadcasters like Stirlen enabled Field and May to fill their assigned broadcasting hours, which led to successful petitions to expand their programming schedules. The *Kitchen Klatter* program, which later aired on KMA, became the longest running homemaker show in radio history.²⁵⁵

Religion was important in the personal and professional life of Field. One of the first features of his new station was religious programming and in addition to having a radio chaplain, Field recruited seed house workers to fill time with religious readings or hymns. Field, an active member of Shenandoah's First Methodist Church, also participated in the work of KFNF's radio ministry. The KFNF Pentecostal Singers, which at one time consisted of six male singers, provided another offering of religious programming. Because of Field's own religious inclinations, the subject matter was prominent on his station and Stirlen's departure did not leave a gap in the station's programming.

Earl May and the Cornbelt Station

If Field's station was known in its infancy for its homemaking and religious programming and their personalities, KMA quickly made its mark with programming for farmers. Earl Ernest May's entrepreneurial journey did not begin in Iowa but on a ranch in Western Nebraska where a young May dreamed of attending college and becoming a

²⁵³ Henry Field Seed Company, "Studio and Broadcasting Station KFNF," n.d., 18-19. GSHS. KFNF File; Jeff Stein, *Making Waves: The People and Places of Iowa Broadcasting*, (Cedar Rapids, IA; WDG Communications, 2004).

²⁵⁴ Henry Field Seed Company, "Studio and Broadcasting Station KFNF," 14.

²⁵⁵ Stein, *Making Waves*, 75; Driftmier's syndicated program left KMA in 1948 and returned in 1972. See Birkby, *KMA Radio*, 139.

lawyer.²⁵⁶ Unable to afford college following his high school graduation, May taught at a country school in Nebraska before enrolling in college to pursue a degree in education.²⁵⁷ May proceeded to the University of Michigan law school in 1911 and completed two years before the death of his father led to his return to Hayes Center, Nebraska. He continued his law studies at the University of Nebraska where he met Gertrude Welch of Shenandoah, the daughter of the owner of the successful Mount Arbor Nurseries.²⁵⁸ May ventured to Shenandoah in 1915 to work for Mount Arbor Nurseries,²⁵⁹ which led to a business deal with Gertrude's father, E.S. Welch, who was known as "the dean of the nursery business."²⁶⁰ Earl married Gertrude in 1916, and eventually opened the Earl May Seed and Nursery Company in 1919 and "five lean years" followed.²⁶¹ Business thrived over at his competitor's nursery. Those years coincided with the infancy of commercial broadcasting and while there was not a station of note in Shenandoah, both Field and May would find that radio was only less than 70 miles away, across the state line. A few weeks after Field's radio debut in September 1923, Gertrude May and parishioners at the Shenandoah Congregational Church presented their own program on WOAW in Omaha.²⁶² While Field was preparing to go on air in Shenandoah, May was working on getting his voice heard. May arranged to air a meeting of the Shenandoah chapter of the Woodmen of the World organization. On January 17, 1924, May ventured to Omaha with

²⁵⁶ Birkby, *KMA Radio*, 2-3.

²⁵⁷ *Ibid.*, 3.

²⁵⁸ *Ibid.*

²⁵⁹ Beaver and Tombrink, *Behind the Mike with Earl May*, 3.

²⁶⁰ Birkby, *KMA Radio*, 4.

²⁶¹ "Better Halves," *The KMA Guide*, August 1945, 6; Birkby, *KMA Radio*, 5.

²⁶² Birkby, *KMA Radio*, 8.

his wife, who sang a solo, the May Seed and Nursery Company performers, and church members who performed with Gertrude during the earlier Congregational Church broadcast.²⁶³ From 9 p.m. to 11 p.m., May invited listeners, some of whom were listening at the May company seed house in Shenandoah, into the first radio camp of the Woodmen of the World.²⁶⁴ The broadcast was a success and May and his crew returned the next month and subsequent months after, receiving positive responses after the first broadcast. The programming of May's two-hour segments evolved from the convergence of the Woodmen meetings to a variety show with contests, music, and agricultural and horticultural talks presented by May. WOAW's arrangement with May was successful but May was not satisfied with simply providing programming to a remote station when his business competitor down the road had his own station that had begun garnering national attention. Moreover, he wanted to serve farmers by helping them start their mornings with agricultural and market reports.²⁶⁵ By June, he announced the building of his own Shenandoah studio to allow the transmission of programs from Shenandoah via WOAW, which was 66 miles away.²⁶⁶

The first program from May's Shenandoah studio aired on September 4, 1924, as 300 people listened from the seed house.²⁶⁷ In the spring of 1925, the vice president of the American Association of Nurserymen received a license to operate a radio station

²⁶³ Ibid., 11-13.

²⁶⁴ Ibid., 12-13.

²⁶⁵ Ibid., 88.

²⁶⁶ Ibid., 16.

²⁶⁷ Ibid., 17.

assigned the call letters, K-M-A, and officially went on air September 1, 1925.²⁶⁸

Although KMA's equipment would have allowed it to broadcast at a higher frequency than assigned it was assigned a Class A designation, operating over wave 252.²⁶⁹

However, even with a limited frequency, KMA grew to meet the needs of its new listeners and quickly earned their trust while his nursery company earned their business, which listeners learned more about through the radio station and later through the radio station's publication, the *KMA Digest*. May fulfilled his mission to serve farmers and the station received grain and livestock quotations from various markets in Iowa, Illinois, Missouri, and Minnesota. One of KMA's most admired personalities was Earl May himself, who announced general news, farm news, and weather and market reports at 10 a.m., 12:20 p.m., and 7:30 p.m.²⁷⁰ "The farmers believe in KMA and its owner," reported *Radio Digest* in its announcement of Mays's 1926 Gold Cup Award.²⁷¹ "He is a vigorous personality who personally directs programs and the imparting of information to listeners. The latter, he always strives to keep accurate, reliable, and trustworthy." In 1926, both Field and May were on the ballot among 129 other announcers vying for the top award. However, Field withdrew from the contest and threw his support behind May, keeping with the spirit of Midwestern radio.²⁷²

Trust was a key component of that spirit of the Midwestern radio and was exhibited by May when he extended customers an unusual form of credit in 1933 when

²⁶⁸ "Radio," *The Nebraska Farmer*, November 7, 1925, 1552 (36); Birkby, *KMA Radio*, 25.

²⁶⁹ Robert Birkby, *KMA Radio*, 24; According to Birkby, KMA's equipment could have operated as a class B station, which were allowed to broadcast between 500 to 1,000 watts.

²⁷⁰ John C. Baker, *Farm Broadcasting: The First Sixty Years* (Ames, IA: Iowa State University, 1981), 127.

²⁷¹ Earl May, "A Chat With Earl May," *KMA Guide*, October 1944, 3.

²⁷² Birkby, *KMA Radio*, 32.

the banks closed. May used the radio to notify farmers that they could continue to order and he would hold their checks until the banking system stabilized.²⁷³ May had faith that his customers would honor their obligations, even as the growing competition regionally and nationally created uncertainty about the overall financial future of the radio company, whose advertising revenues of \$100,000 in 1939 were mostly attributed to local advertisers.²⁷⁴ “Earl May was also worried that advertisers might be wooed from KMA by stations serving the larger market of Omaha and Council Bluffs, particularly KOWH and NBC affiliate KOIL,”²⁷⁵ explained Robert Birkby. To ensure the stability of the station, May sold 25 percent of the station to Central Broadcasting, whose president was the founder of Palmer School of Chiropractic, B.J. Palmer, who also held the licenses for WOC in Davenport, Iowa, and WHO in Des Moines.²⁷⁶

The reorganization did not prevent KMA from maintaining its status as a leader in independent radio within the Midwest, an achievement the station prided itself on. May was a leader in the industry-at-large and was even on the original Planning & Advisory Committee of the American Broadcasting Co., which required him to make frequent trip to New York City.²⁷⁷ When recalling such trips for readers of the *KMA Guide*, May

²⁷³ “KMA Radio Firsts,” *KMA Guide*, July-August 1975, 12. Accessed at the Shenandoah Public Library.

²⁷⁴ Birkby, *KMA Radio*, 73.

²⁷⁵ *Ibid.*, 73.

²⁷⁶ WOC went on the air on February 18, 1922, and is considered the first commercial radio station licensed in Iowa. The licensee was originally Karlowa Radio Company of Rock Island, Illinois, but due to the financial stress of operating the station, the owner transferred the license to Palmer who operated the station from Davenport. WHO began broadcasting on April 11, 1924 by the Banker’s Life Company and was later purchased by Palmer. See Stein, *Making Waves: The People and Places of Iowa Broadcasting*, 8, 175.

²⁷⁷ Earl May, “A Chat With Earl May,” *KMA Guide*, March 1946, 3.

would just casually mention highlights of the trip like stopping off at the White House to visit with President Truman.²⁷⁸

KMA was a forerunner in the industry-at-large and did not shy away from recounting the station's "radio firsts" in the special 50th anniversary issue of the KMA Guide:

- ◆ First to develop audience participation shows in 1926.
- ◆ First to present early morning broadcast in 1925 with weather, news, music at approximately 5:00 a.m.
- ◆ First to schedule regular news broadcasts, begun in 1928 a decade ahead of all the rest.
- ◆ First to keep farmers up-to-date by broadcasting regular agricultural releases from U.S. Department of Agriculture in 1925.
- ◆ First to employ a full-time radio homemaker who started in 1926.
- ◆ First political straw vote taken in 1936; inaugurated at 11th annual pancake feed.
- ◆ First big national network program originated by KMA was in 1940 when the National Radio Foundation asked KMA along with the Waldorf-Astoria Hotel in New York to stage a Presidential Ball.
- ◆ Charter subscriber to Radio news service of United Press...²⁷⁹

Neighboring On The Air

From the visits to the store and radio station to the annual jubilees that existed prior to the 1940s, KMA listeners were always afforded access to May and the other radio personalities. Sending in a postcard or writing a letter was one of the quickest ways for listeners to connect with their favorite personality. Letters helped early broadcasters

²⁷⁸ Ibid., 4.

²⁷⁹ "KMA Radio Firsts," *KMA Guide*, July-August 1975, 12. Accessed at the Shenandoah Public Library; The UPI relationship allowed the station to compile its newscasts directly from the press wire services. See Ralph Childs, "How KMA Will Cover the Invasion," *KMA Guide*, June 1944, 5.

connect with their audiences and established the communion necessary for community formation.²⁸⁰ In a sense, sending in a letter was like submitting an application for admission into the radio communities. Receiving a written response, a signed photograph, or a mention on the air could be considered an initiation rite. Reading the letters during the broadcast or incorporating them into station literature helped to fortify the listener's engagement with the program and could be seen as an indication of their buy-in into the community.

Counting correspondence was one way the station gauged the popularity of programs, and Iowa broadcast professor Jeff Stein suggested that the hosts of individual programs started their publications in response to answering the frequently asked question posed in listener letters.²⁸¹ The KMA radio homemakers were the entertainers who often received the most letters for their “neighboring on the air.”²⁸²

Evelyn Birkby, who wrote a newspaper column called *Down a Country Lane* sparked the interest of KMA Women's Director Doris Murphy and became a KMA radio homemaker in May 1950. She explained: “The radio homemakers have long filled a need in the lives of those who listen. Men as well as women have enjoyed following the experiences of their favorite homemakers and their families for years, tuning in the programs every day as one might turn on a soap opera. Many lonely listeners have found in the radio homemakers people whose feelings they share. Still others have sought

²⁸⁰ Spencer Miller, “Radio and Religion,” *Annals of the American Academy of Political and Social Science* 177 (1935): 135.

²⁸¹ Stein, *Making Waves*, 86.

²⁸² Evelyn Birkby, *Neighboring on Air* (Iowa City, IA: University of Iowa Press, 1991), 20.

guidance as they started their homes, raised their families, and coped with everyday life.”²⁸³

Radio homemaker programs flourished and made history in Shenandoah, however, the genre originated in New York and date back to 1923.²⁸⁴ Proctor & Gamble, the company that developed soap operas for radio and later for television, introduced *Ruth Turner’s Washing Talks* and Mrs. Reily who promoted Ivory soap in 1923. In later years, Camay soap sponsored Emily Post and Crisco hosted the *Skillet Sisters*.²⁸⁵

Broadcast scholar Morleen Getz Rouse explained, “Experimentation in radio programming for the homemaker during the 1920’s and 1930’s took several forms, most notably shows to entertain, shows to teach, shows to help raise children, shows that offered conversation, and shows on cooking and shopping.”²⁸⁶ Stations such as KFNF and KMA knew nothing about the science of radio programming; however, they quickly realized that the success of their new ventures would require making radio “an indispensable household commodity” in a region “where the agrarian lifestyle was the only common bond.”²⁸⁷

Homemaker programs were not sophisticated in quality but they were just the right product to offer to farm wives and city housewives, who were the main

²⁸³ Ibid.

²⁸⁴ Rouse, “Daytime Radio Programming for the Homemaker,” 316.

²⁸⁵ Ibid.

²⁸⁶ Ibid.

²⁸⁷ J. Steven Smethers and Lee Jolliffe, “Homemaking Programs: The Recipe for Reaching Women Listeners on the Midwest’s Local Radio,” *Journalism History* 24, no. 4 (1998/1999), under “Teeming with recipes,” <http://weblinks2.epnet.com.proxy.lib.uiowa.edu>

demographic of daytime programming.²⁸⁸ Between Field's sisters, the female workers at the seed house, and some female neighbors, the station did not need to look far to adapt this genre of programming that aided the station in its direct selling efforts.

By the 1930s, radio was not only seen as a medium for information but one for entertainment as listeners around the country tuned into popular network programs like *Amos and Andy* and serial programs such as *Just Plain Bill* and *The Goldbergs*.

While such shows were available to KMA listeners when the station eventually affiliated with a network in its infancy, May considered the farmer the station's most important listener. "It has always been our endeavor to bring to our friends of the farm audience the best possible in radio service, and we feel that in procuring fulltime, we are going a long step in the proper direction," said Earl May in a front-page newspaper article announcing KMA's authorization to air 20.5 hours of programming in 1936.²⁸⁹

Public Service, Convenience and Necessity

In the infancy of commercial broadcasting, suitable programming simply equated to there being enough music, singing, or talking to fill time. However, the Radio Act of 1927 provided standards for licensees to meet in an effort to sustain their licenses. Robert McChesney explained that earlier versions of the legislation included wording supporting non-profit broadcasting in an effort to stabilize the industry. However, the wording was removed from the bill and replaced with "public interest, convenience, or necessity,"

²⁸⁸ Rouse, "Daytime Radio Programming for the Homemaker," 316.

²⁸⁹ "KMA begins full time on air this week after delay," *Shenandoah Gazette*, August 7, 1936, 1; The schedule change was originally slated for May 1936, but the FCC ordered a stay, which prohibited the change until 1936. The move came after year-long legal battle with KGBZ, which was located in York, Nebraska. KMA previously shared the wavelength with the station before reportedly buying it in July 1936. See "Start KMA Tower With Experts and Day Men Combined," *Shenandoah Gazette*, July 28, 1936.

granting the FRC *carte blanche* to interpret.²⁹⁰ To ensure commercial stations balanced their program offerings, licenses were granted, denied, or renewed based on whether the programs offered were “in the public interest, convenience, and necessity.”²⁹¹ Stations seeking license renewal were asked to demonstrate how they provided a “well-balanced program structure” by reporting the average amount of time they devoted to the following kinds of programming: entertainment, religious, educational, agricultural, fraternal, etc. A 1948 Federal Communications Commission report stated 50 percent of all broadcasting was commercial, so providing sustaining programming could aid any imbalance that may have existed with a station’s programming.²⁹² Programs that addressed minority tastes, those devoted to the needs and purposes of non-profit groups, and programs that were of an experimental nature would qualify and were often the kinds stations sponsored or sustained.

With its programming, KMA offered a little something for everybody in the entire family, no matter whether they were a farmer, the farmer’s wife, a shut-in unable to leave home, or a young person. Some KMA entertainers were homegrown talents while the station often provided an additional venue for established performers like the Blackwood Brothers Gospel Quartet, who began performing at KMA in 1940 when they were not on tour. The station also served as a launching pad for other family groups like the Everly Brothers.²⁹³ During the 1940s, the preteen Don and Phil Everly performed with their

²⁹⁰ Robert W. McChesney, *Telecommunications, Mass Media and Democracy* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1993), 33.

²⁹¹ FCC, *Public Service Responsibility of Broadcast Licenses Report* (1946).

²⁹² *Ibid.*

²⁹³ Robert Birkby, *KMA Radio*, 100-103.

family members during the *Everly Family Program*.²⁹⁴ *The KMA Country School* program was one of the long- running entertainment programs that illustrated how important people and their variety of talents were to KMA's programming. The program began airing in 1928 and was one of the station's most popular programs that attracted thousands to the live Shenandoah broadcasts and shared with thousands more as the cast traveled to perform in other cities. Like Stirlen's magazine and Send Out Sunshine Club conventions, these off-site events helped the larger imagined community fortify their communion with their favorite radio performers and maintain their listenership and fellowship within the community.

KMA's Public Interest, Convenience, and Necessity

To their rural listeners, the farmer stations exceeded the public interest standard by providing programs that were not held in the same regard by urban listeners. KFNF and KMA crafted programs that their listeners could identify with, participate in, and only find on the homegrown stations that sought to engage their listeners in their programming. For example, in 1939 KMA began broadcasting the *Iowa Rural School Radio Graduation Program*, an effort coordinated with the Rural Section of the Iowa State Teachers Association to provide rural schools, which educated about 60 percent of the students in the Midwest, with higher quality commencement exercises.²⁹⁵ "The things that radio could do would be to put on a big production program for all rural schools, and the pupils and teachers would merely have to turn on a radio set to get the best graduation program available – better than any consolidated or city school would have," explained the editor of the July 1944 *KMA Guide*. In the first five years of the program, speakers

²⁹⁴ Ibid., 104-105.

²⁹⁵ Editor, "Rural Schools on the Air," *KMA Guide*, July 1944, 6.

included the Governor, the State Superintendent, notable speakers, and talents from the rural schools.²⁹⁶ The station prided itself on the program and on May's sponsorship. "Even many colleges can't equal that record! And who met the expenses of these programs? Earl May, of course!"²⁹⁷ KMA underwrote, produced, and made available the *Forward March* series, which explained rural education and how the schools served America during the war.²⁹⁸

In addition to programming, KMA also provided service to the public by responding to natural disasters as well as through the charitable interest of the station's owner. In his 1956 dissertation on the development of amplitude modulation radio stations in Iowa, Ernest Andrews identified the "raising of funds" as one of the key ways KMA served the public. Andrews found that in 1935, the station collected \$1,200 to aid the relief work after a flood near McCook, Nebraska, killed and left a thousand people homeless. In 1936, the station collected more than \$5,000 for the American Red Cross' relief work to assist with the floods in Ohio, and the station raised funds and was used as a communication facility to assist with the distribution of aid in the aftermath of a tornado in 1940.²⁹⁹ For May, service to the community extended beyond the radio station, yet some of his efforts later benefited the station and the nursery company. In 1943, May donated \$75,000 to Iowa State University for the development of what became the Tropical Research Center in Antigua, Guatemala. Earl May also made annual

²⁹⁶ Ibid.

²⁹⁷ Ibid.

²⁹⁸ Ibid.

²⁹⁹ Ernest F. Andrews, Jr., "The Development of Amplitude Modulation Radio Broadcasting Stations in Iowa: A Selective History" (doctoral dissertation, University of Iowa, 1956), 293.

contributions to keep the Center functioning.³⁰⁰ In 1948, Gertrude May, station executives, and an engineer ventured to Guatemala for the Center's opening that featured Mrs. May as the speaker. Additionally, the station, with the help of the College and KMA's farm director, Merrill Langfitt, planned a series of programs to broadcast directly from Central America.

On January 21, 1947, Edward May was elected president of both the May Seed Company and the May Broadcasting Company. The fruit of salesmanship did not fall far from the proverbial May tree, which is evident in Edward's pitch of the new radio program, which was now competing not only against other radio stations in reach but also television.

Tough Times Silence Roar of an Era

The early years of KFNF were successful ones and the seed business grew into "the largest mail order seed and nursery company in the U.S. and that means in the world."³⁰¹ However, Field was not immune from the financial crisis of 1929, and he and his businesses continued to feel its impact as farmers spent less on seed and direct selling could do no more than their customers wallets allowed. In June 1930, Field announced a reorganization of the company, which resulted in the expansion of the company and the creation of branch stores in and around Iowa.³⁰² In 1932, his business affairs took a back seat for a season as Field ventured into politics, subsequently winning the Republican

³⁰⁰ Edward May, "A Chat With Edward May," February 1948, 3.

³⁰¹ Field, *The History of Henry Field*, 141.

³⁰² *Ibid.*, 152.

nomination for the U.S. Senate. He lost in the general election because of the Democrat victory propelled by Franklin D. Roosevelt.

By then, everything about radio had evolved from the technology to the programming, which featured many shows thought to have nationalized the audience. Susan J. Douglas explained that Americans listened to the same programs with the same themes and determined what it meant to be American and what was acceptable while imagining other listeners within this context.³⁰³ Broadcasters like Irish-Catholic Priest Father Charles Coughlin, a national demagogue, created an intimacy with radio listeners, which became a technique adapted by broadcasters like President Franklin D. Roosevelt for his *Fireside Chats* that started in 1933.³⁰⁴ Listeners believed Roosevelt was in their homes as he talked about the economic state of the union. Although the country underwent financial difficulties, the networks were well-established and flourishing, home receivers were more sophisticated, and across the country listeners developed into interpretive communities of individual programs such as *The Jack Benny Show* and *Amos and Andy*.

The financial problems of the seed company and the station continued and Field eventually lost control of the business. Until 1936, the seed company held the station license, however, the corporation, formed with the help of outside parties after the reorganization, KFNF, Inc. held the license until 1948.³⁰⁵ Through the technology of

³⁰³ Susan J. Douglas, *Listening In: Radio and the American Imagination*, (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1999), 11.

³⁰⁴ See Jason Loviglio, *Radio's Intimate Public: Network Broadcasting and Mass-Mediated Democracy* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2005).

³⁰⁵ Ernest Francis Andrews, Jr., "The Development of Amplitude Modulation Radio Broadcasting Station in Iowa: A Selective History" (PhD diss., University of Iowa, 1956), 339-365.

recordings or transcriptions, Field, who held the honorary title as president, continued to give his daily talks via the *Letter Basket* program and write the *Seed Sense* publication. Henry and his wife moved to the Missouri Ozarks where he raised cows, pigs, and maintained a smaller garden.³⁰⁶

Both Frank and Leanna left KFNF for KMA when the company reorganized around 1940; Frank began hosting two early morning 15-minute segments featuring farm and market reports and the weather.³⁰⁷

Conclusion

The Shenandoah farmer stations and their owners, Henry Field and Earl May, had already established an imagined community amongst their listeners by the time Stirlen found her way to Shenandoah and onto the airwaves. Subsequently, this foundation prepared the way for the imagined religious community Stirlen established and maintained.

Earl May remained a dominant force on his station and in 1945 he and Owen Saddler, a longtime staffer who became the station's general manager in October 1945, were certified by the U.S. State Department as radio correspondents.³⁰⁸ In celebrating 40 years of "living" radio, a station writer claimed the following:

Why is KMA so successful, and continue to hold such a unique position the broadcasting industry?" The answer is that although KMA is located in a small community, it is not tempted to localize its service to the city in which it operates, as is the case with many radio stations in large metropolitan areas. KMA must serve hundreds of towns in scores of counties, most of them essentially rural in

³⁰⁶ Louis Cook Jr., "Henry Field -- Successful Back Fence Philosopher," *Des Moines Sunday Register*, June 6, 1948, 6L.

³⁰⁷ Birkby, *KMA Radio*, 90-92.

³⁰⁸ Earl May, "A Chat With Earl May," *KMA Guide*, May 1945, 3.

nature. The service rendered by KMA is unduplicated by any other station in the area.³⁰⁹

At the time of his death on December 19, 1946, in Duluth, Minnesota, the *New York Times* credited May with helping ease the 1933 banking crisis and being “an originator of the early morning broadcast which he inaugurated at his station at 5:30 A.M., Oct. 20, 1925.”³¹⁰ Stirlen shared this memory of May with her readers in a tribute published in the *S.O.S. Signal* magazine: “One time I accompanied Mr. May and his good wife to a funeral of a famous man. Mr. May received more attention than the corpse that day, and as the people passed out the door with sorrowful faces from viewing the remains, their faces lighted when they recognized their friend, Earl May, seated near the door.”³¹¹

May, who did not mind sharing the spotlight with others, became a celebrity not only for his work on air but also as a radio station owner whose presence on the ether did not go unnoticed by radio listeners or Washington-based regulators who had to figure out how to manage homegrown stations like KFNF and KMA.

With radio, the two men served the listening public, strengthened their brands, made Shenandoah a tourist attraction, and introduced Midwestern culture to the masses through their radio programs. Media scholar Robert L. Hilliard noted that even government agencies like the U.S. Department of Agriculture recognized the significance of radio for improving farm life and were among the first producers of farm information

³⁰⁹ “Ambling Down Memory Lane,” *KMA Guide*, July 1965, 7.

³¹⁰ “Earl E. May, Helped Ease Banking Crisis,” *New York Times*, December 20, 1946.

³¹¹ Edythe Stirlen, “A Tribute to Earl E. May,” *S.O.S. Signal*, January 1947, 6. Box 14, Stirlen Papers.

disseminated via radio.³¹² Hilliard explained, “Farm information became one of the first major program formats on the new medium.”³¹³ However, Field and May realized that in addition to information to assist farm families improve their livelihoods and way of life, they could develop programs appreciated by rural listeners who enjoyed hearing women cook from their kitchens or the singing of the people who worked at the local general store. For rural listeners, radio was more than entertainment and a passive experience. Farm radio was an ongoing conversation and fellowship. However, the station owners can be credited for their homegrown programming and the controversies that came along with their advertising tactics, their presence and participation in the early radio debates had the most lasting effects on the radio industry and the community they served. Because they along with other independent broadcasters fought for their frequencies and ability to stay on the air, they were able to help the industry maintain a diversity that it would have lacked if only the networks remained. As a result, broadcasters like Stirlen reaped the benefits of access, although limited at times. As an independent broadcaster on an independent broadcast station, Stirlen could cater her messages and program to suite her community and the wider imagined community associated with farm radio.

³¹² Robert Hilliard, “Symposium Introduction: Farm and Rural Radio – Some Beginnings and Models,” *Journal of Radio Studies* 8, no. 2 (2001): 323.

³¹³ Ibid.

CHAPTER 6

HEARING THE OUTSIDE WORLD

IN THE ROOM OF MY SHUT-IN LIFE

I am sure that many of you have already noticed this program on the air is not prepared with the idea of pleasing man. It is not an entertainment program. We are not resorting to any cheap tricks to get people to listen or write or help.

“Voluntary Ignorance” sermon, The Rev. Edythe Stirlen³¹⁴

Even if Stirlen wanted to personally visit every sick and shut-in or lonely person within the reach of her listening audience, she would not have had enough time in her days. Although Stirlen’s on-air contact was indirect, the daily broadcasts offered just the right interaction with rural women who viewed radio as a friend and a way to cope with the isolation and loneliness of farm life. When Mrs. Joe Keller relocated to an Iowa farm from Oklahoma City in 1933, she recalled the loneliness she experienced and how the zero-degree temperature added insult to injury.³¹⁵ One day, a shut-in invited her to listen to Stirlen’s program and that served as her initiation into the community. After hearing the broadcast, she wrote in asking how she could help the shut-ins. Years later Keller wrote, “How your ministry via the air has connected the inside world with the outside world. Many shut-ins could never have heard God’s word had it not been for your gifts of radio to them. Many, many would not have been converted or had opportunity to have joined the church.”³¹⁶ In some cases, listeners joined brick-and-mortar churches in their respective communities while in others they received the “right hand of fellowship” in Stirlen’s *Radio Church of the Air*.

³¹⁴ Edythe Stirlen, Sermon #141, “Voluntary ignorance,” Box 4, Stirlen Papers.

³¹⁵ “Dear Edythe and Little Minister of K.M.A.,” *S.O.S. Signal*, July 1938, Box 14, Stirlen Papers.

³¹⁶ *Ibid.*

This chapter seeks to examine the impact Stirlen's broadcast had on the imagined religious community formation by asking the following questions: How did Stirlen's radio broadcasts recruit and sustain listener membership in the imagined religious community? What tactics did Stirlen use to promote community? How did the challenges of the radio industry impact both the broadcast and the imagined church community? Moreover, how did Stirlen's broadcast meet the "public interest, convenience, and necessity" standard? While this standard was formally measured by how many hours a station obligated to specified programming, Stirlen's program contributed in other informal ways that can only be understood by examining the content of her sermons as well as the listener letters printed in the *Signal* magazine.

In recent years, scholars have located and examined other documents of ordinary rural women that have unraveled how these women, whose opinions might have never been included in the popular telephone polls of the time, engaged with mass mediums such as radio. For example, rural-life historian Pamela Riney-Kehrberg discovered the diary of a Kansas farmwoman named Mary Dyck whose listening habits she analyzed to study the importance of radio to isolated farm women.³¹⁷ Like other Americans, Dyck tuned into the serial dramas, purchased products advertised for her family, and listened to the political commentary and President Franklin Roosevelt's *Fireside Chats*. Moreover, Dyck, who was not a member of a local church, found solace in the ecumenical religious offerings she located on her radio. "Instead of going to church, church made its way into the family home," concluded Riney-Kehrberg.³¹⁸ Although Dyck may have never listened

³¹⁷ Pamela Riney-Kehrberg, "The Radio Diary of Mary Dyck, 1936-1955: The Listening Habits of a Kansas Farm Woman," *Journal of Radio Studies* 5 (1998):66-79.

³¹⁸ *Ibid.*, 72.

to Stirlen, her story is reflective of those in Stirlen's community who reaped communal and spiritual benefits of religious programming.

Not everyone, however, considered radio a blessing because of its potential to adversely impact the local church. "Radio will tend to eliminate the small-church preacher, as a preacher, because it will enable country people to hear the best preaching," reported *The Literary Digest* in an article about a report issued by statistician Roger W. Babson. If rural people heard the best sermons on the radio, it was suspected that they would not feel compelled to go to their physical houses of worship. Country ministers would always be necessary, as radio could offer preaching but people still required one-on-one pastoral care.³¹⁹ Thus, Babson suggested churches embrace radio and see it as their own assistant in the work since the medium helped more people engage with religious matters. Babson wrote: "Religion is something very vital and something for which every man and woman some day hungers. The radio will carry this spiritual help to all homes at such times and the ultimate result is sure to be a greater real interest in religion."³²⁰

*Radio Church of the Air and
Its Listener-centered Programming*

Whether listeners were sick and unable to leave their rural homes or unable to attend church because of the gasoline crisis of the 1940s, Stirlen's radio programs offered preaching, teaching, and singing. Whether it was a 15- or 30-minute program, Stirlen offered the right mix of elements that kept her audience tuned in for more than 50 years.

³¹⁹ "Church Use of the Radio," *The Literary Digest*, October 13, 1928, 31-32

³²⁰ *Ibid.*, 32.

When her allotted time on air shifted, she shifted and taught her community to do the same.

In 1945, the National Association of Broadcasters (NAB) classified religious programming as being either “listener centered” or “program centered.”³²¹ In a NAB instructional pamphlet designed for current and perspective programmers, the following description was provided for a listener-centered program: “The speaker invades a private parlor. He talks not to tens of thousands of people in a hypothetical radio congregation but rather to two or three people gathered in their own parlor.”³²² The program-centered approach was the second classification and was as old as commercial radio itself. This type of programming transported the listeners to the church service or event.³²³ “Through the medium of radio, he feels as if he were a part of the church service or right at the scene where events are occurring.”³²⁴ Listeners across the country had access to both listener-centered and program-centered religious programs since the medium’s infancy.

Stirlen’s broadcast exhibited characteristics of being both listener- and program-centered, as it ushered the worship experience into the homes of shut-ins who imagined themselves as congregants in her virtual congregation. Listeners envisioned, if only for a few minutes, that they were in worship with other congregants as Stirlen ministered and discussed the concerns of parishioners. Unlike modern-day televangelists who contract with cable outlets enabling their programs to be shown at various times in different

³²¹ E. Jerry Walker, *Religious Broadcasting: A Manual of Techniques... A Guide to Those Who Prepare and Present Religious Programs* (Washington, D.C.: National Association of Broadcasters, 1945), 9.

³²² *Ibid.*, 10.

³²³ *Ibid.*, 9.

³²⁴ *Ibid.*

markets, Stirlen's listeners tuned in at the same time. In true imagined community form, there was simultaneity of experience.

Religious Broadcasting in Shenandoah

Both Field and May included religious broadcasts among their early lineups and initially financed broadcasts utilizing both approaches. While the major networks broadcast the worship services of large congregations in metropolitan areas, KMA gave its listeners access to a diversity of religious programming, including independent broadcasters like Stirlen and the program-centered broadcasts of Shenandoah churches. In August 1936, KMA wired Shenandoah churches and installed the necessary equipment so local churches could broadcast remotely. The eight churches initially involved in the agreement alternated between two, one-hour spots on Sunday morning, 10 a.m. to 11 a.m. and noon to 1 p.m.³²⁵ Two churches, Emmanuel Lutheran and Evangelical Covenant even rearranged their morning worship schedule in order to take advantage of the broadcasting opportunity. Because Stirlen's Sunday morning programs were relegated to early morning hours before worship services began, her *Sunday Morning Sunday School*, which remained on KMA's lineup for nearly 50 years, did not experience a disruption.

The Radio Church of the Air

In the 1930s, there were many religious programs on the air, however, Stirlen's program was often a one-woman show that offered a blend of prairie songs, prayers, preaching, teaching, and discussion. Unlike her male counterparts who hired singers and were often accompanied on-air by their wives, Stirlen was the chief preacher and vocalist. She was assisted by KMA's organist, Fayton Geist, at one period of time;

³²⁵ "All Churches to Broadcast on KMA," *Shenandoah Gazette*, August 25, 1936, 1.

however, the most prominent feature of the on-air program beyond Stirlen that listeners recalled is a canary bird that could be heard in the background or featured from time to time.

Although the Radio Church of the Air was the general name of her radio ministry and one specific program, Stirlen hosted other programs with various names and foci. In the magazine, she rarely went into detail about the content of her programs, which suggests listeners and readers were so in tune with their imagined religious community that members were aware of what was going on. Other than Sunday School teachers who may have commented on the impact of one of the programs that outlined each Sunday's lessons, letters printed in the *Signal* rarely identified individual programs. During the early years when Stirlen held more than one timeslot, listeners discussed and grouped the program under the *Radio Church of the Air* umbrella even though Stirlen had different names for programs that aired during different segments of the day. "Tune in Regularly if possible, and pray all during the broadcast, Please [*sic*]," Stirlen posted at the bottom of "The Little Ministers Schedule" printed in a 1938 issue of the *Signal*.

Her morning broadcasts included the *Morning Watch* and *Morning Worship* as well as an early Sunday morning Sunday School program which was the one program that consistently aired during the entire life of her KMA career. Other early morning programs were the *Send Out Sunshine Meeting* and the *Sunshine Hour*. After Stirlen left KFNF, the shut-in program of a similar name continued to air. The *Evening Call* and *Request Hymns Program* were request programs where Stirlen read messages from listeners and sang selections they asked her to sing via mail. Members did not always know how to submit requests, so there were times where Stirlen explained the appropriate

protocol for submitting requests. Although Stirlen's program did not include as much direct selling as the other KMA programs, members did not always interpret that Stirlen's program was different. In a letter written to her oldest daughter and reprinted in the *Signal*, she wrote the following: "I have been educating my radio audience to write all songs requests on a single separate piece of paper, also all orders to the May Seed Co. and messages to give to other people at the Seed House."³²⁶ Stirlen expected the problem to be resolved once the community knew what was expected.

From time to time, she also used the *Signal* for other issues that plagued the broadcast. For example, she needed to solve the "bothersome problem" of satisfying all of the song requests received from her listening community. Stirlen explained:

Every day people write, "Please sing 'What a Friend' for me, at 1:30 Tuesday." Suppose my program is already **full**. I can sing only 2 songs on each program. What shall I do, wait until **I can** sing the favorites song mentioned or send greetings with some other song that has previously been booked – maybe a month in advance? Would it not be well when making a request to say, "Please sing 'What a Friend' **or** some other song you might be using?" Or how would **this** be – "Please sing 'What a Friend' at your earliest convenience at 1:30. Some radio entertainers contend that people would rather hear their names read than their favorite song sung. I have always supposed they asked for a particular **song** because they preferred it. In the future when making song requests if you **want** them at a certain day and hour please give me the privilege of singing another song previously booked – or I will more than likely carry it over until I can sing the song requested. I really try so hard to please you. Won't you help me to serve you better?"³²⁷

Stirlen initially gained popularity for singing old ballads and spirituals but as her time on air increased, she "grew bolder and talked more about the Lord and His love."³²⁸ Some listeners did not embrace this shift in her program and thought she had "ruined" her

³²⁶ Edythe Stirlen, "A Letter From Home," *S.O.S. Signal*, February 1941, Box 14, Stirlen Papers.

³²⁷ Edythe Stirlen, "Attention All," *S.O.S. Signal*, May 1940, Box 14, Stirlen Papers; The bolded words were highlighted in the original passage.

³²⁸ Edythe Stirlen, "Time Marches On," *S.O.S. Signal*, September 1942, Box 14, Stirlen Papers.

program by incorporating the preached word. “We can hear preachers any place but no one can sing the old songs like you,” they told her.³²⁹ Though saddened by the disapproval of some listeners, Stirlen followed the still small voice from heaven that instructed her to preach the Gospel. She did not want to simply entertain her audience; rather, she wanted them to teach them about her God whom she encouraged them to accept as their Lord and Savior.

On air and in the magazine Stirlen constantly outlined the agenda of the community and urged members to embrace the vision. Whereas members may have had various interpretations for other images and messages, it was necessary for community members to be on one accord when it came to the overarching goal of the ministry. Stirlen explained to *Signal* readers, “[T]his is not a program. It is just a little time of worship—in your home and my home. Not a show—but a time alone—you and I—at your house and my house—with God and with His holy word.”³³⁰ For shut-ins in rural communities, radio was more than a medium for entertainment; rather, the religious broadcasts of broadcasters like Stirlen provided comfort, spiritual edification, and a connection to the world outside of their homes and hospital beds.³³¹ The latter sentiment was expressed by listeners like Fern Salsaa of Ventura, Iowa:

I have now had my radio for a few days, so want [sic] to write and tell you how much I enjoy and appreciate it. I think a radio is the finest thing on earth for a shut-in. It brings the Gospel to hungry souls, to satisfy and comfort the lonely in heart and make the hours pass swiftly. I for one can say it has done this for me and even more, in the short while I have had my radio. So, I want to say from the

³²⁹ Ibid.

³³⁰ Edythe Stirlen, “Our First Broadcast At 1:15 p.m. June 1,” *S.O.S. Signal*, July 1942, Box 14, Stirlen Papers.

³³¹ See Steve Craig, “‘The More they Listen, the More They Buy’: Radio and the Modernizing of Rural America, 1930-1939.” *Agricultural History* 80, no. 1 (2006): 1-16.

very bottom of my heart, thank you, Edythe, and all who so kindly assisted in making it possible for me to have a radio.³³²

Stirlen's broadcast was a classic product of what Ben Armstrong defined as "the electric church." Armstrong, a media scholar who once led the National Religious Broadcasters, provided the following explanation about the role of both the broadcaster and the listener in the virtual religious environment:

In the electric church, as in the New Testament times, worship once again takes place in the home. The speaker is the guest, as was the apostle Paul who traveled to people's homes. The radio or television minister earns the right to be heard by the content of his message...In the electric church, power does not rest with the radio or television speaker but with the individual who has the power to turn the dial.³³³

The two former stations were not initially easy to locate on the dial because of weak frequencies and the poor quality of sets owned by listeners. Yet, listeners made the extra effort and necessary adjustments to locate Stirlen's program that offered an imagined community of support. For listeners who for some reason or another could no longer function in the real world, the *Radio Church of the Air* provided an opportunity to participate in and stay connected to the outside world.

Bertha Walker of Stuart, Iowa, was "hard of hearing" for many years but did the best she could to listen to Stirlen's daily broadcast although her condition had gotten to the point where she no longer attended church. "She would join in the hymn singing, just as she did before her handicap, but could understand everything by turning the radio loud and getting her chair close. Your hour brot [sic] her much pleasure in the last years of her life, and I want to thank you in her behalf. If you could have seen her at her radio during

³³² Fern Salsaa, "Rev. Edythe Stirlen," *S.O.S. Signal*, November 1939, Box 14, Stirlen Papers.

³³³ Armstrong, *Electric Church*, 9.

your beautiful broadcasts. I am sure you would have felt well repaid for your time and effort in putting on the programs,” wrote Walker’s husband after her death.³³⁴

Because Stirlen had been introduced to radio when stations were still developing programming and she had the opportunity to interact directly with listeners prior to hosting her own show, she had the opportunity to get insight into what exactly listeners wanted. As a radio hostess at KFNF, she would have heard what they liked or disliked about the station and the programming while she escorted them around the facility. Moreover, her hostess duties might have afforded her the opportunity to participate in the opening of mail, which would have further alerted her to what members of the community wanted and needed to stay connected to their farmer station.

The NAB contended that in order for a religious broadcaster to have an effective program, the producer should consider the sole purpose and audience for the program.³³⁵ “Choose a single purpose—the one most pressing for your own situation,” the organization advised. While the manual may have aided ministers or churches considering radio as a means of communication, Stirlen’s ministry was in its 15th year by the time the information was published. Stirlen’s success with a sole purpose proved that the NAB’s suggestion was advantageous, as Stirlen had determined her target audience in the late 1920s: shut-ins and those wishing to serve them. In 1930, Stirlen became KMA’s director of welfare and responsible for the station’s religious broadcasting.³³⁶

³³⁴ George A. Walker, “Little Minister, KMA,” *S.O.S. Signal*, November 1939, Box 14, Stirlen Papers.

³³⁵ *Ibid.*, 8.

³³⁶ Birkby, *KMA Radio*, 94.

For her own program, she used the framework of the KFNF Sunshine program, along with her childhood memories to develop a new religious program that moved beyond preaching and hymn singing. Stirlen wanted to reach the infirmed and isolated because she recalled her lonely days in Kansas, and she did not want others to experience the same.³³⁷ “Loneliness prepared my heart to love people; to want to make other people happy.”³³⁸ In a sermon broadcasted on KFNF on February 13, 1948, she further explained her desire to reach out to those on the margins of society referred to in the Bible as “the least of these.”³³⁹

When I first took up the ministry it was because I realized how much trouble there was in the world and [I] wanted to alleviate some of it. My direct work among the shut-ins. I tried to give each one a friend. I tried to have each one remembered with a gift. I tried to have each one in my radio audience but when they were too far away to hear my voice I knew with one of the radioes [*sic*] we gave them surely wherever they were they could hear one of God’s servants...³⁴⁰

Even if these individuals were not able to leave their homes or work outside of the home, Stirlen sought to communicate to them that they were valuable not only as listeners but also because their souls were valuable to the God whom she survived. Therefore, while Stirlen answered the needs of the radio station and assisted with diversifying the station’s programming, she was also responding to a spiritual call issued by the Apostle Paul to the Jews who became the earliest Christians. “But how are they to call on one in whom they have not believed? And how are they to believe in one they have never heard? And how are they to hear without someone to proclaim him,” asked

³³⁷ Stirlen, *The Little Minister’s Devotional Selection*, 2.

³³⁸ *Ibid.*

³³⁹ See St. Matthew 25:37-40.

³⁴⁰ Edythe Stirlen, sermon 118, Stirlen radio broadcasts sermons 1940-1948, Box 4, Folder, 1.

Paul.³⁴¹ Because some members of the imagined radio church were unable to leave their homes or attend other worship serves, messengers like Stirlen fulfilled the call that enabled the Christian Church to expand.

Radio Weddings

One of the featured items in the early *Signals* were photographs and entries about the couples whom Stirlen married on-air at the studio or at her home. Weddings were held throughout the week and Stirlen used the *Signal* to invite couples to come to KMA for their weddings after they secured their licenses in Clarinda, Iowa, the county seat.³⁴² Weddings were broadcast on-air at the Mayfair Auditorium or later at her home, and she was willing to arrange an on air marriage any day of the week.³⁴³ “The Little Minister delights to make hearts happy by reading the marriage ceremony,” she wrote in editions of the *Signal*.³⁴⁴ Radio weddings were not uncommon on Shenandoah radio, as the Rev. James Pearson of KFNF also performed weddings on the air. Stirlen married hundreds of couples, many of whom were from the local area, but many couples traveled to Shenandoah to have Stirlen preside over their nuptials. Most times, the couples or their parents were members of the imagined religious community but they had come to Stirlen after hearing the other ceremonies on the radio or reading about them in the *Signal*.

She credits Henry Field with creating the idea of on-air weddings and encouraging couples to get married by the radio preachers.³⁴⁵ One writer suggested Field

³⁴¹ Romans 10:14 (New Revised Standard Version).

³⁴² Edythe Stirlen, “A Few Announcements,” *S.O.S. Signal*, April 22, 1935, Box 14, Stirlen Papers.

³⁴³ *Ibid.*

³⁴⁴ Edythe Stirlen, “Remember—,” *S.O.S. Signal*, October 1936, Box 14, Stirlen Papers.

³⁴⁵ Author unknown, “The Story of Henry Field’s [*sic*]” KFNF File. GSHS.

advertised the availability of the services in his seed-house catalogues and suggested “that anyone who could find a partner could find everything else needed for a wedding at Field’s—the minister, the rings, and even a honeymoon cottage. Henry would throw in five gallons of free gasoline to get them to Shenandoah.”³⁴⁶ One of the first weddings narrated to listeners by Field himself was that of KFNF singer Luetta Armstrong, whose on-air ceremony was promoted for weeks.³⁴⁷ Inviting the listening audience to the on-air wedding was not just a move to draw a larger listening audience, but the move demonstrated the station’s engagement with the larger imagined community. For them, the wedding was seen as a “family” affair, as they had bonded with Armstrong through the airwaves or had crossed paths with her while visiting Shenandoah.

Television: The Devil’s Playground

Stirlen's broadcast also addressed secular matters, such as the role of the media in the home, which she viewed as negative beyond its ability to disseminate the gospel to the masses. “Many are complaining about so much sex and immorality on T.V. The communists have boasted our country would fall because of such [*sic*],” wrote Stirlen, citing 1910 as the year Communists began seeking to gain control of mass media.³⁴⁸ Stirlen did not address the medium of television as a competitor to radio; rather, she identified the medium as competition for a listener's attention and time as it related to spiritual matters. “Is it a blessing? Is it a curse? How are we to cope with it for evidently radio and TV are here to stay. Do we find any scripture that is relevant?” Stirlen cited

³⁴⁶ Ibid.

³⁴⁷ Thornell Barnes, “Culture Waves from KFNF,” *The Tanager*, 1927. KFNF File, GSHS.

³⁴⁸ Edythe Stirlen, “Many are complaining...,” *S.O.S. Signal*, October –November 1977, 9, Box 16, Stirlen Papers.

John 2:15 when challenging readers to choose God over secular matters. She did not believe all content on radio or TV was "worldly"; rather, she wanted Christian believers to be mindful of anything that could interfere with their Christian walk. In a prayer, which is usually the way she ended each broadcast, she noted radio and television as two of the five major inventions to have revolutionized life. The airplane, automobile, and air conditioning were the three others.

Stirlen noted that radio had changed lives by making a plethora of information available. Additionally, she cited television as both educational and a "cultural asset." "It is wonderful to spread the gospel. But we can not say that indiscriminate use of TV is good...any more than it would be good for us to read every magazine or book published. Some things are not edifying..."

Bystanders or Standbys?: Financing The Community

"Each day we need 6 people, from 4 states to respond with a letter and offering; Iowa, Nebr., Kan. and Mo. Long experience proves that these offerings average \$1 each."³⁴⁹

It has not been determined what Henry Field or Earl May could have paid Stirlen as a salary. She did, however, receive compensation for the broadcast until she was taken off the air. Prior to leaving for his vacation in July 1935, Earl May left blank \$100 check for her services. In a letter enclosed with the check, he wrote,

I feel that you have done a lot of good for the radio audience, and I realize that the religious services are a lot of benefit. Yet, you have three children that appear at the table three times a day, and if they are like our children, they seem to enjoy eating about everything, so it takes a lot more than religion to supply the food for the table.³⁵⁰

³⁴⁹ Edythe Stirlen, "Open Letter," *S.O.S. Signal*, November 1950, 4, Box 15, Stirlen Papers.

³⁵⁰ Earl E. May to Edythe Stirlen, July 10, 1935. Private collection.

Another facet of the brick-and-mortar church replicated by the *Radio Church of the Air* was the giving and collection of tithes and offerings. The new Christian churches that were birthed after Jesus' Ascension were dependent on the financial contributions of believers.³⁵¹ In the Bible, the Apostle Paul wrote of how the churches in Macedonia contributed faithfully to the early church although its members were poor people.³⁵² Paul further advised that churches should remember the poor, which were similar to the group Stirlen and her community reached out to. The Apostle Paul advised, "So then, whenever we have the opportunity, let us work for the good of all, and especially for those of the family of faith."³⁵³

Similarly, Stirlen consistently reminded members of their obligations and members responded in both traditional and creative ways. From quoting scriptures, sharing back stories on the financing of the radio program and magazine, to witty quotes, Stirlen made sure members were aware of their role in financially maintaining the community as well caring for its leader. After Stirlen became an independent contractor of radio time, a regular salary did not exist and she depended on what she called the "love gifts" sent in by her listeners. "Every time you withhold your monthly support you cripple the Broadcast. Stations will not have us on if we are 'offensive with our soliciting for money.'"³⁵⁴

³⁵¹ See Luke 8:3

³⁵² See 2 Corinthians 7: 1-6.

³⁵³ Galatians 6:8 (New Standard Revised Edition)

³⁵⁴ Edythe Stirlen, "Open Letter," S.O.S. Signal, November 1950, 4, Box 15, Stirlen Papers.

According to the code adopted by the National Religious Broadcasters in an effort to self-regulate themselves, religious broadcasters were “ethically bound not to make a direct appeal over the air.”³⁵⁵

The financing of radio in general was a hotly debated topic since the beginning of commercial broadcasting, and while regulation aided in establishing boundaries, it did not automatically solve all of the problems regarding the financing of religious broadcasts. Religious broadcasters with the consent of the Federal Communications Commission attempted to regulate themselves and adhered to codes adopted by the National Religious Broadcasters and groups such as the Religious Work Study Group at the Institute for Education by Radio in Columbus, Ohio. In May 1942, the latter agency suggested religious programs should seek the support of radio stations, as one way for the stations to adhere to the public interest, convenience, and necessity obligation mandated by the Radio Act of 1927. Additionally, it was not advisable for groups to form for the sole purchase of radio time. Rather, committees could finance a program that sought a sustaining time slot.³⁵⁶ The code also suggested, “no regular religious radio programs should appeal over the air for contributions for the support of the radio program itself. Nor should a charge for sermons, pamphlets or religious objects, distributed through religious programs, be used by the sponsor as a means of raising funds.”³⁵⁷ The accepted means of financing did not include the funding of programs by the audience. Yet, that did not stop religious broadcasters from asking their audience for donations. Stirlen, however

³⁵⁵ E. Jerry Walker, “Religious Broadcasting: A Manual of Techniques...A Guide to Those Who Prepare and Present Religious Programs (Washington, DC: National Association of Broadcasters, 1945), 17.

³⁵⁶ *Ibid.*, 17.

³⁵⁷ *Ibid.*

may have avoided requesting money on air, but there were no rules prohibiting Stirlen from soliciting within the magazine.

“The financial load is a heavy one. We have too many Bystanders and not enough Standbys,”³⁵⁸ Stirlen told members. To demonstrate that they were not simply bystanders in their fellowship, members found various ways to lighten the financial load.

Subscribing to the *Signal* and submitting love offerings, which were often a few dollars or coins sent via the U.S. mail, were the simple ways Stirlen raised funds for the ministry. Additionally, Stirlen asked members to purchase subscriptions as gifts or raise funds by distributing individual copies sold for a dime. However, members had different interpretations of how they could bear the financial burdens of the RAC. One shut-in member, who did not want her name revealed in the *Signal*, devised the “God’s Acre” plan, which Stirlen requested she share with other members. In the February 1947 issue, she suggested other members secure corn seed from the May Seed Company or Henry Field’s store so they could plant an acre or half acre of corn and at harvest, donate a portion of the proceeds to Stirlen for the *Radio Church of the Air*. “I have sold my corn for \$1.10 per bushel, in the crib, and while it hasn’t been entirely estimated as yet, I think my half of one acre will amount to about \$28.50, and I will send you a check for that amount.”³⁵⁹ While the specifics of the corn-seed distribution are somewhat confusing, it appears that the shut-in provided the corn to be planted. Stirlen appreciated the gift and asked members who participated in the God’s Acre effort to write her if they wanted to use some of the corn.

³⁵⁸ *S.O.S. Signal*, December 1949, 2, Box 15, Stirlen Papers.

³⁵⁹ “Dearest Edythe and Little Minister,” *S.O.S. Signal*, February 1947, 11, Box 14, Stirlen Papers.

Bird C. Moore of Manhattan, Kansas, an 85-year-old with a collection of model boats, contacted Stirlen when he was in declining health so he could auction the boats off in an effort to financial support the ministry. “He asks that each one wanting a boat send \$1.00 for a subscription to the S.O.S. Signal; \$1.00 for an offering to keep the broadcast on the air, and \$1.00 to him to pay for the crating and mailin [*sic*] of the boats.”³⁶⁰ In a previous issue, Moore had submitted a childhood testimony and issued the same offer in a Post Script.

Contributions as well as penny postcards and letters sent in also served another purpose for Stirlen and other broadcasters. Any item with an address attached could assist in building a mailing list and subsequently the building of a community. Stirlen used the new addresses to distribute complimentary copies of the *Signal* with the hopes that the recipient would tune in, write in, or simply inquire about the work they had read about within the magazine. Stirlen needed listeners’ donations just as much as she needed their letters to substantiate her programs’ relevance and to fill the pages of the *Signal* and keep her community united.

Financial Challenges Ignite Policy Changes

Throughout her time on KMA, the Radio Church experienced various schedule changes and was removed from the schedule one summer when the station wanted to carry ball games at her regular time.³⁶¹ The schedule changes may have sparked some tension between Stirlen and KMA executives. An example of one such incident was addressed in a 1937 interoffice memorandum written by May. The memorandum

³⁶⁰ “Mr. Bird C. Moore,” *S.O.S. Signal*, February 1947, 12, Box 14, Stirlen Papers.

³⁶¹ Stirlen, *The Little Minister’s Devotional Selection*, 5.

provides a glimpse into the shifts in local programming and the impact of the accessibility of network programming and its offering of diverse sustaining programming³⁶²:

You perhaps have a feeling that your programs are moved around a little too often, and I am agreeing with you, that possibly they have been. I do know, however, that the new people, like Kaufman and Chamberlain. Consider your programs extremely important, and I want to explain why a few of your programs have been moved. For example, we have the opportunity, through our purchasing time for commercial purposes of the seed business, over WHO and the two Des Moines Register & Tribune stations, of obtaining many helpful programs. The line charges cost us a certain amount per month, and the more we can use them to our advantage the more we get for our money. In other words, if we put on 10 programs a month, outside of our commercial broadcasts it wouldn't cost us a cent.³⁶³

Programs like Stirlen's, which were once commonplace on early independent, local stations in the 1920s and 1930s, were being evaluated for their economic viability and ability to meet the station's "public interest, necessity, and convenience." The latter was a requirement that the federal government mandated in order for a station's license to be renewed.³⁶⁴ While the nation was in its second world war abroad, local broadcasters at home were trying to stay in the battle called commercial radio, as the major networks were evolving and expanding across the country. Hilmes contends: "With a network, one

³⁶² According to a 1946 report by the Federal Communications Commission, sustaining programming served as the "balance-wheel by means of which the imbalance of a station or network's program structure, which might otherwise result from commercial decisions concerning program structure, can be redressed." After the formation of Federal Radio Commission in 1927, the precursor to the FCC, stations were charged with underwriting programming to secure balance. A balanced programming schedule consists of not only entertainment, but also religious, educational, agricultural, fraternal and other programs of interest to minority tastes and interests.

³⁶³ Earl May to Edythe Stirlen, Feb. 24, 1937. Private collection.

³⁶⁴ Radio station licenses were granted, renewed or denied by first the Federal Radio Commission and later the Federal Communications Commission on the basis of whether or not the programming stations provided programming "in the public interest, convenience, and necessity." Application of the "public interest" standard could be seen a station's broadcast of sustaining programs, carrying of local live programs, the carrying of programs devoted to public discussion, and the elimination of commercial advertising excesses.

large corporation could supervise the programs for an entire national grid of stations, rather than letting a lot of small-time and possibly irresponsible stations in a lot of small cities broadcast whatever they pleased.³⁶⁵

KMA joined the Blue Network of the National Broadcasting Company in 1938, and was courted to move to Omaha but choose to stay in Shenandoah.³⁶⁶ KMA's budding relationship with NBC may have influenced programming changes that inevitably affected the *Radio Church of the Air*. As of August 21, 1939, the *Morning Watch* program, which aired at 7:30 a.m., became a mid-morning devotional at 8:30 a.m. Some changes not only disrupted the times of Stirlen's programs but also the format. Stirlen alerted her listeners in a "Special Notice" published in the September 1939 *Signal* that weekday programs were now commercially sponsored. Because of this change, she would be unable to "read long lists of names of dedications."³⁶⁷ To accommodate the advertisements that she predicted would take one to two minutes of her broadcast time, she provided listeners with a format for their song requests and asked them to check the time they would possibly listen to the broadcast.³⁶⁸

In the fall of 1939, the "Vesper Hour," one of Stirlen's popular programs airing at 6 p.m. on Sunday, was removed from the schedule.³⁶⁹ Stirlen's daughter Rosalee often appeared on the show with her sisters and was disappointed with the cancellation. She

³⁶⁵ Hilmes, *Only Connect*, 47.

³⁶⁶ Birkby, *KMA Radio*, 71-72.

³⁶⁷ Stirlen, "Special Notice," *S.O.S. Signal*, September 1939, Box 14, Stirlen Papers.

³⁶⁸ *Ibid.*

³⁶⁹ In the February 1940 issue of the *Signal* Stirlen reported that the program was "discontinued for the winter months," however, the program never returned to the programming schedule.

discussed the cancellation in a letter written to her stepfather, Carl, who was working away from home due to the limited opportunities available due to the economy and war abroad. The teenager wrote, “I suppose you know about the Vesper. Mother doesn’t seem to care but I know she doesn’t want us to feel bad so she doesn’t talk about it. It was a shock to us to find out that after all these years they were taking it off.”³⁷⁰ Program changes did not go unnoticed by listeners like Lora Webb of Barnard, Kansas, who wrote in that they were aware of the changes taking place with the program. Webb wrote in:

Never a day goes by, but I think of what I missed by not getting to go to the Convention. I enjoyed it all so much. In looking over the old Signals I see how much more time you used to have on the air than now. Oh! I wish you might have it again. I’m thankful for what you have however. I guess, Edythe I’d have you on Station SOS running continuously all day long. Sounds like I do want to over work you, doesn’t it? But quite the contrary, I do pray for you and the work each day for you mean so much to me.³⁷¹

In 1940 when KMA broadcasters were required to promote the Olson Rugs catalogues, she thanked her listeners for their loyalty and contended the advertisement did not hurt the sermon. She wrote:

Naturally we wish we didn’t have to advertise on my programs but as I think about it, I’d much rather do that than to have to “beg” for money of my radio friends to keep me on the air for that is being over-done as it is... Mr. May has been so kind to let us have our Radio Church Services free of cost all these years. I personally want to help all I can. So know what they give us to talk about or to be interested in lets’ show them that we have numbers and those numbers have loyalty “plus”.³⁷²

³⁷⁰ Rosalee Swartz Stirlen to Carl Stirlen, October 30, 1939. Private collection.

³⁷¹ Leora Webb, “Never a day...,” *S.O.S. Signal*, September 1939, Box 14, Stirlen Papers.

³⁷² Edythe Stirlen, “A Little Chat with the Little Minister,” *S.O.S. Signal*, March 1940, Box 14, Stirlen Papers.

Webb and others submitted to the request of keeping the program on the air, as they recognized it as a way to maintain the community they all had labored to keep on the air. Until 1942, Stirlen broadcasted from the KMA studio or the station's Mayfair Auditorium. However, that year, she announced that due to the shortage of tires the "patriotic thing to do" was to discontinue driving the family car unnecessarily³⁷³ and relocated the broadcast to her home. After the relocation, she was adamant that her mail be sent to the Post Office box and not the station or her home.

Politics Surrounding Community Building

Stirlen's physical relocation from the studio to her home was only one of the many changes on the horizon for the *Radio Church of the Air*. From 1930 to 1942, Stirlen was an employee of the May Seed Co., May's nursery company, a separate entity from the broadcasting company. During the final months of her contract, she explained that KMA bought five minutes of her time because she was on salary there. However, the station could not hire her to "preach doctrine," but if she purchased time, she could speak the truth.³⁷⁴ When Stirlen was required to pay for air time in 1943, she explained to *Signal* readers that the new arrangement, which would shift her from an employee to a contractor, prevented KMA from breaking the law of preaching doctrine. "When one is hired by a radio station they must NOT preach DOCTRINE of any kind," she explained.³⁷⁵ Stirlen reported the *Radio Church of the Air* would now cost \$2 per minute, and her club members, listeners, and readers were needed to fulfill the financial

³⁷³ Stirlen, "Talk By the Little Minister Given On the Air Sunday, June 30," *S.O.S. Signal*, July 1942, Box 14, Stirlen Papers.

³⁷⁴ Stirlen, "These Changing Times," *S.O.S. Signal*, February 1943, Box 14, Stirlen Papers.

³⁷⁵ *Ibid.*

obligations of the new radio contract.³⁷⁶ By now, Stirlen's ministry exploits, the magazine, and the radio broadcast relied solely on the financial support of community members.

When Stirlen's program was sponsored by the station, she did not have to worry about creating revenue; rather, she paid more attention to creating a stable following that could become a target audience to potentially purchase items sold by the radio station's holding companies. This group or following would be measured by fan letters, which not only gauged numbers but also reception to radio programs.

Time was when programs were kept on the air by "fan mail." People would write to radio stations and say: 'Keep the program on the air. I like it very much. I listen every day, I never miss a program.' But today programs such as ours are not kept on the air by "fan letters". I know a good many do not realize that it costs hundreds and thousands of dollars to carry on the work.³⁷⁷

Money previously donated to assist shut-in S.O.S. club members was now needed to pay for radio time. Stirlen provided the following explanation to clarify the future of the

Radio Church of the Air:

We are no longer a "cheer" club but a church! We can no longer buy gifts to give to our shut-ins for most gifts are not on the market for one reason. For another reason the money is not available, since we must buy radio time or leave the air... We are now a "Church" on the air. Not a welfare society or a cheer club. We can not do ALL things. So we have to choose and as an ordained minister of the gospel with a thirst for souls you can not blame me if I choose to preach the GOSPEL.³⁷⁸

Had KMA affiliated with NBC earlier, Stirlen and others may have never had the chance to broadcast, as NBC had the first policy preventing the sale of time to

³⁷⁶ Stirlen, *The Little Minister's Devotional Selection*, 5.

³⁷⁷ Edythe Stirlen, "Open Letter," *S.O.S. Signal*, January 1944, Box 14, Stirlen Papers.

³⁷⁸ Edythe Stirlen, "These Changing Times," *S.O.S. Signal*, February 1943, Box 14, Stirlen Papers.

independent religious broadcasters.³⁷⁹ Instead, NBC offered free time to representatives who were Catholic, Protestant, or Jewish.³⁸⁰ The KMA affiliation with NBC ended in 1943, but KMA would later affiliate with two other major networks, ABC and Mutual.³⁸¹

Although the purchase of time continued the activity of the *Radio Church of the Air* on KMA, it would not protect the radio ministry from the business decisions of KMA executives. J.C. (Cy) Rapp was the station manager who broke the news to Stirlen in 1945 that her program was once again in jeopardy. Rapp wrote: “Effective October 1, 1945, KMA’s executive board decided to limit paid religious program to Sunday morning, 6 a.m. to 12 p.m. and on weekdays from 4:30 a.m. to 6 a.m.”³⁸²

This change in policy is necessitated by our need for additional time for the presentation of a more diversified schedule of public service programs, especially programs of farm service nature. In recent years the increasing demands of the networks have restricted³⁸³

An undated letter addressed to Gerrit Broekhuis of Edgerton, Minnesota, outlined the situation affecting the removal of paid religious programs. Owen Saddler, station manager, recapped the executive committee’s decision and explained that 14 percent of the existing programs were eliminated in an effort to provide additional public service programs in the area of agriculture, education, current events, music, etc. Saddler stated that although the station would lose \$30,000 with the move, they had to consider how to give “the greatest radio service to the greatest number of people. Thus, KMA chose to award sustaining time to the Blackwood Brothers Gospel Quarter of Shenandoah, who

³⁷⁹ Hilmes, *Only Connect*, 122.

³⁸⁰ Ibid.

³⁸¹ Birkby, *KMA Radio*, 71; “Traffic Department,” *KMA Guide*, February 1946, 11.

³⁸² J.C. Rapp to Edythe Stirlen, August 11, 1945. Private collection.

³⁸³ Ibid.

began performing at KMA in the fall of 1940.³⁸⁴ The group performed throughout the region and made no money performing on KMA.

Programs that addressed minority tastes, those devoted to the needs and purposes of non-profit groups, and programs that were of an experimental nature qualified to receive sustained or free time from radio stations.³⁸⁵ To ensure commercial stations balanced their program offerings, broadcast licenses were granted, denied, or renewed based on whether the programs offered were “in the public interest, convenience, and necessity.”³⁸⁶ Stations seeking license renewal were asked to demonstrate how they provided a “well-balanced program structure” by reporting the average amount of time they devoted to the following kinds of programming: entertainment, religious, educational, agricultural, fraternal, etc. A 1948 Federal Communications Commission report suggested that 50 percent of all broadcasting was commercial, so providing sustaining programming could aid any imbalance that may have existed with a station’s programming.³⁸⁷

As time passed, it was evident that the community would become more dependent on the *Signal* to maintain its existence. With decreased broadcast time and less geographic coverage as a result of stricter wave restrictions, KMA’s programs would no longer be picked up across the country as they were when the farmer stations were charged with wave jumping. The limitations of coverage and time also expanded the *Signal’s* fundraising role as well as placed a greater financial responsibility on existing

³⁸⁴ Owen Saddler to Gerrit Broekhuis, n.d. Private collection; Birkby, *KMA Radio*, 102-103.

³⁸⁵ FCC, Public Service Responsibility of Broadcast Licenses Report (1946).

³⁸⁶ *Ibid.*

³⁸⁷ *Ibid.*

community members. A smaller community meant fewer donations, and that is one message Stirlen constantly attempted to communicate.

Time was when Radio Programs were heard all over the U.S. and of course the response was quick and gratifying. Now the coverage is so small that every listener must feel responsibility. Please do not wait for a personal written message each month from your Radio Minister. Please help us save that money and strength required to tell you of the need you know is there each and every month...Every time you withhold you monthly support you cripple the Broadcast. Stations will not have us if we are “offensive with our soliciting for money” [sic].
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To compensate for the limited coverage and time, Stirlen continued to seek other outlets to reach listeners. In the 1970s, her radio broadcast was also heard on KDMI in Des Moines and KOAK, a station based in Red Oak. The greater the reach the greater the resources needed to pay for airtime. As 1978 approached, Stirlen informed the community that they could receive tax benefits for donating 30 percent of their income to churches or good causes. Stirlen promised that she would not be like other entities that solicited support without cause and used their mailing lists to prey on its contacts. “There are companies that are paid to send out pitiful letters soliciting our help. My conscience will not allow me to operate that way,” she explained, adding that although companies gave donations to avoid taxes, community members should give because they recognize the church as “a soul saving institution.”³⁸⁹

Conclusion

Whether Stirlen’s program aired for an hour or for 15 minutes, these broadcasts were imagined as visits to listeners who often had limited contact with people beyond their caregivers. Although other programs were offered throughout the day, Stirlen’s

³⁸⁸ Edythe Stirlen, “Open Letter,” *S.O.S. Signal*, November 1950, Box 15, Stirlen Papers.

³⁸⁹ Edythe Stirlen, “About Taxes,” *S.O.S. Signal*, December 1977- January 1978, 12, Box 16, Stirlen Papers.

program helped those on the margins of society imagine that they were valued and that their concerns were important to others if only for a few minutes of the day. Instead of preaching denominational doctrine, which greatly influenced her theology, Stirlen took on universal topics like love, joy, and forgiveness that a mass audience from all theological persuasions could identify with.

Stirlen essentially learned how to not only become a broadcaster but also a businesswoman as she transitioned from being a staffer to a contractor who must develop, market, and finance her own product. For Stirlen, establishing a community that understood and embraced its responsibility as financial supporters of the ministry was of the utmost importance if she and her community were to survive and thrive in an evolving media environment that no longer reaped the same benefits it once did during the infancy of the medium.

Stirlen's ministerial efforts reached beyond the airwaves as she married radio listeners in her home, visited the sick, traveled to bury devoted listeners living in other towns, and participated in other rites and ceremonies. With Stirlen as the radio pastor and leader of the community, the radio friends metaphorically conducted the work of a Christian church. While traditional churchgoers worshipped in sanctuaries, Stirlen's congregants listened to sermons in their living rooms, kitchens, and from their hospital beds. Collection plates were not passed from pew to pew, rather, they were transported through the hands of postal workers who delivered tithes and offering to Stirlen's Shenandoah Post Office box.

Although Stirlen did not host revival meetings similar to her contemporaries in radio like Aimee Semple McPherson, she built her ministry through combining the

efforts of her radio program, the *Send Out Signal* magazine, and aid sunshine clubs.

Stirlen learned to couple the broadcast with what religious media scholar Stewart Hoover called “non broadcast, direct-contact activities.”³⁹⁰ The Send Out Sunshine Club will be discussed in the following chapter in an effort to investigate how the external activity contributed to the creation of community beyond the mass mediums.

³⁹⁰ Hoover, *Mass Media Religion*, 50.

CHAPTER SEVEN

“THE ASSISTANT IN THE WORK”:

S.O.S. SIGNAL MAGAZINE AS SACRAMENTAL SPACE

For *Radio Church of the Air* congregants who could not hear Stirlen’s radio broadcasts, the *Send Out Sunshine (S.O.S.) Signal* magazine was used to minister, extend membership, and sustain the imagined religious community she created. Stirlen considered the radio periodical her “assistant in the work” and her “one and ONLY assistant Pastor.”³⁹¹ Beyond a secretary or two and the aid of family members, Stirlen’s ministry did not have the administrative and ministerial support common to churches of the time. Thus, the magazine had a great responsibility, which will be examined in this chapter that analyzes the imagined religious community formation that took place within the pages of the *Signal* and the interpretive work conducted by the imagined religious community in an effort to understand and commune with their *Radio Church of the Air*. This chapter sought to answer the questions: How did Stirlen and the community make use of the pages of the magazine as a sacramental space? What interpretive strategies were used to define and understand the images of communion that establish the imagined religious community of the *Radio Church of the Air*?

Radio Magazines

The S.O.S. Signal was not the first magazine of its kind in Shenandoah or in the area of religious broadcasting. In addition to being influenced by the success of former co-worker’s Leanna Driftmier’s *Kitchen Klatter* magazine, Stirlen may have also been motivated to begin a publication after seeing KFNF’s radio pastor, the Rev. James

³⁹¹ Edythe Stirlen, “Why Are There Not More Religious Broadcasts?” *S.O.S. Signal*, October 1942, Box 14, Stirlen Papers.

Pearson, begin *CHIPS* in February 1935.³⁹² Pearson wrote in the first issue that he personally financed the magazine in response to requests that he publish the highlights of his radio messages.³⁹³ Although only a few issues could be located for examination, the content of the available issues indicates Pearson also used the publication to connect with his listeners and expand his ministry efforts. Items published included information on the Radio Mission Church, sermon notes, articles on other spiritual matters, and a few entries on secular issues such as punctuality.

On a national level, other religious broadcasters used regularly published newsletters and magazines to interact with their radio congregants. Radio ministers such as evangelist Aimee Semple McPherson (*Bridal Call*), demagogue Father Charles E. Coughlin (*Social Justice*), and fundamentalist preacher Charles E. Fuller (*Heart to Heart Talk*) all used monthly publications to spread the Gospel and to solicit donations to fund their radio ministry and other exploits.

McPherson used the *Bridal Call* to solicit donations to build her own radio station, and Hangen argued that coupling the broadcast with the magazine helped the sensational broadcaster recreate an imagined religious community.³⁹⁴ “Both revival and print networks paved the way for radio to unify the national community of like-minded Christians by creating and strengthening what we might today call “virtual communities”: people sharing common interest and goals but physically separated over long distances,”

³⁹² Birby discussion; There is no clear explanation for the title of the publication.

³⁹³ James Pearson, “Just a Word,” *CHIPS*, 1, Box 5, Folder 11, Henry Field Collection, State Historical Society of Iowa, Iowa City.

³⁹⁴ Hangen, *Redeeming the Dial*, 65.

Hangen explained.³⁹⁵ Stirlen was aware of McPherson's ministry and attended one of her revivals while on vacation in Colorado.³⁹⁶

S.O.S. Signal: The Assistant in the Work

The diversity of items in Stirlen's collection suggests she was a voracious reader of local as well as nationally distributed publications. Moreover, Stirlen was also an avid reader of the Bible. All of these documents could have easily influenced the content as well as the structure of Stirlen's publication.

Stirlen began publishing the *Signal* in April 1935 with the objective "To save sinners, comfort saints, and increase faith."³⁹⁷ The magazine was intermittently published from 1935 to 1938 and began consistent publication in 1939. She continued the 16-page format and published 10 issues a year. In the spring of 1952, Stirlen combined the April and May issues, due to being sick with flu.³⁹⁸ "Many magazines do that all the time during the summer months. Am sure you will understand," she explained in her monthly editorial.³⁹⁹ However, she maintained the combined editions until the magazine ceased publication in November 1981. She served as editor and publisher during its entire run.

Stirlen credited Isabel Gray of Wakefield, Kansas, with naming the publication, which was actually a spin-off of the organization she left at KFNF.⁴⁰⁰ Stirlen created the publication with the help of a community composed of readers, radio listeners, and Send

³⁹⁵ Ibid., 66.

³⁹⁶ "Rev. Stirlen Returns," Newspaper Clipping, 1937, Box 1, Folder 1, Stirlen Papers.

³⁹⁷ Masthead. *S.O.S. Signal*, November 1937, Box 14, Stirlen Papers.

³⁹⁸ "Please Notice That This Is A Combined Issue of the Magazine For Both April and May," *S.O.S. Signal*, April and May 1952, 4, Box 14, Stirlen Papers.

³⁹⁹ Ibid., 7.

⁴⁰⁰ "The name for this," *S.O.S. Signal*, April 22, 1935, Box 14, Stirlen Papers.

Out Sunshine Club workers who used the pages of the *Signal* as their meeting place and “sacramental space.”⁴⁰¹ Like the nations Anderson described in his texts, some of them would never meet face to face yet they had “images of communion” and codes that helped them to establish meaning for their community known as the *Radio Church of the Air*.

From 1938 to 1952, members paid \$1 for a subscription a year. In the early years of the publication, Stirlen charged members to have their contributions printed and some agreed to pay to have entries published and paid for shut-ins who could not afford the publication rates. Collecting the rates of three cents a line of straight reading material, 25 cents per column inch for ads, and \$1 per picture helped defray printing costs.⁴⁰² At the end of a 1971 sermon preached on KFNF, Stirlen issued a plea for support and explained how the *Signal* played a role in that. “I wish each and every one would be taking our radio church magazine, the SOS Signal, 1.00 per year. We don’t make any money on it but we can get acquainted through it and I will put in your hand material that will help you to be a better Christian where ever you are [*sic*].”⁴⁰³

Stirlen recognized that the magazine played an integral role in the exchange of information within the community. “It helps us to get information to you. It helps the

⁴⁰¹ New media scholar Heidi Campbell used the phrase “sacramental space” to describe how the Internet serves as place for religious users to present their beliefs and practices. See Heidi Campbell, “Considering Spiritual Dimensions Within Computer-mediated Communication Studies,” *New Media & Society* 7 (2005): 110-132.

⁴⁰² Rates for Publication in the S.O.S. Signal, December 1938, Box 14, Stirlen Papers.

⁴⁰³ “For our text for this message,” July 12, 1971, Box 16, Stirlen Papers.

shut-ins when we tell of their need. It helps you to be a better Christian and church worker,” Stirlen informed readers.⁴⁰⁴

Community Formation

Stirlen’s community did not form haphazardly; rather, she extended an invitation first to her listeners and later to the readers of the *Signal*. Since the beginning of her KMA radio ministry, she could depend on the Send Out Sunshine Club members to help expand the imagined religious community through their physical work in their individual local communities. Invitations into the community were embedded within other communications, including letters and special advertisements designed to promote the *Radio Church of the Air*.

Membership requirements were simple and the requirements were few: “We have no creed but the Bible. Our only requirement for membership is daily Bible reading and prayer,” explained Stirlen about the *Radio Church of the Air* in an undated welcome letter written to her friends.⁴⁰⁵ Stirlen initiated the codes or the images of communion, which in this case were dispensed via the broadcast and the *Signal*, as listeners and readers adopted them and attached their own interpretations to them while uniting as an imagined community on the same proverbial page. For example, when Stirlen admonished “send cheer” during the radio broadcast or within her editorials, members understood the request. Yet, some may have interpreted the need in various ways. Some sent cards, which was a norm of the community while others sent monetary or tangible gifts. Those living in proximity to members in need may have physically stopped by for an individual or group visit.

⁴⁰⁴ Edythe Stirlen, *S.O.S. Signal*, March 1959, Box 15, Stirlen Papers.

⁴⁰⁵ Stirlen to “Dear Friend,” n.d., Private Collection.

The Gospel Goes Forth

The Book of Acts serves as the foundational document for which the New Testament church was established. The principles of the early church as outlined in Biblical scripture provides a lens through which Stirlen's community can be examined, as they observed tenets similar to those of brick-and-mortar churches in the United States during the twentieth century. Four functions of the early church as outlined in the Book of Acts were instruction, fellowship, worship, and evangelism.

Stirlen did not want listeners to consider her program and ministry as simply a daily broadcast; rather, she wanted her listeners to have a spiritual encounter in fellowship with other like-minded individuals. In a sermon preached in the 1940s, "Humility, Meekness and Unselfishness," Stirlen explained that members should not consider their affiliation with the *Radio Church of the Air* or the Send out Sunshine Club as membership in a club, but she reminded listeners that "church work" is what was taking place. She admonished, "It was to glorify the Lord we were working. So day by day it hurt me more to say "My" work. It was the 'Lord's work.'"⁴⁰⁶ Some members saw her ministry as a collaboration among them all; others saw her as the sole reason for the ministry's success.

Religious Instruction

Parishioners attending weekly Bible studies could discuss the religious issues and interrogate scriptures in person in their brick-and-mortar churches, but Stirlen's parishioners communicated their concerns, questions, and understanding of scripture by writing letters to the radio minister. With the help of secretaries, Stirlen sorted and

⁴⁰⁶ Edythe Stirlen, "Humility, Meekness, and Unselfishness," Folder 2, Box 3. Stirlen Papers.

selected letters, poems, and inspirational contributions that were published in the *Signal*. The content of the letters were also instrumental in the creation of the images of communion, so Stirlen also incorporated the content into the radio broadcasts.

Stirlen gauged the community's understanding of her instruction while at the same time creating an opportunity for fellowship with other communities within the community by promoting contests that tested listeners' understanding of topics discussed on the radio. In 1937, Stirlen asked members to communicate their understanding of the unpardonable sin. Essentially, community members were asked to identify sins God could not forgive. Members not only responded to this question in different ways, but they also interpreted the question in various ways. Some members addressed "sinning against the Holy Ghost," "Blaspheme against the Holy Spirit," "the nature of sin against the Holy Spirit," or simply answered the central question, "What is the unpardonable sin?" Some members answered the question with scripture while members like J.A. Beckwith of Gowrie, Iowa, referred to scripture but likened the unpardonable sin to a contemporary example. Beckwith wrote, "I wish to compare it with First Degree Murder, which as I understand the law is, deliberate, willful, and premeditated, or in other words a person thinks over his own mind, or plans it with some other person."⁴⁰⁷ For the Heydorn family from Council Bluffs, Iowa, the unpardonable sin equated to suicide. While interpretations and answers varied, Stirlen identified five women from Iowa and Kansas who all agreed "on the interpretations as to what the unpardonable sin is."⁴⁰⁸ For the community, sin existed even if members believed there were varying degrees of sin.

⁴⁰⁷ J.A. Beckwith, "Gowrie, Iowa, Feb 15, 1937," *S.O.S. Signal*, April 1937, Box 14, Stirlen Papers.

⁴⁰⁸ "These all agree on the interpretations..." *S.O.S. Signal*, April 1937, Box 14, Stirlen Papers.

Stirlen preached about topics such as sin, faith, family life, and salvation. Members who could not hear her broadcasts could read them when they were reprinted in issues of the *Signal*. Members often requested a reprint of certain sermons, as Stirlen did not distribute recorded messages. After hearing Stirlen's radio sermon on "Reverence," Sylvia Tyner of Salem, Iowa, requested the message be placed in the next edition. "I believe that your sermon was the best I have ever heard...Maybe more people would do differently if they saw it in print," wrote Tyner who added that she enjoyed Stirlen's preaching because Stirlen sang the right songs and the program wasn't spoiled by inappropriate joking.⁴⁰⁹

Stirlen did not have formal broadcasting or theological training to prepare her for religious broadcasting; however, her prior experiences prepared her for the assignment. She attended college for teacher training and taught elocution, which gave her the ability to communicate the gospel with clarity and authority. Some members interpreted her messages as more informative than the sermons given in their brick-and-mortar houses of worship, while others viewed Stirlen's teaching as a supplement to their traditional worship experiences. New converts or those who were just being exposed to Christianity and its messages expressed appreciation for Stirlen's teachings.

⁴⁰⁹ Sylvia Tyner, "Dear Little Minister," *S.O.S. Signal*, July 1940, Box 14, Stirlen Papers.

Fellowship

Koinōnia is the Greek word for fellowship, which is translated as “communion” in the New Testament of the Bible.⁴¹⁰ The communion or coming together of Stirlen’s audience took place as they shared their faith as well as their take on other issues they considered relevant and consistent with the overall values of the imagined religious community.

A pillar of many faiths is prayer, which was a central component of Stirlen’s community. The call to pray and requests for prayer were of great importance to the *Radio Church of the Air*. Even if members were geographically separated, prayer was one of the activities that connected them spiritually and within the text of the magazine. For many members, the pages of the publication served as a symbolic altar where they could present their petitions before God and their community members.

Although prayer was an expectation for all members of the community, the S.O.S. Prayer League, led by Opal Jones of Mystic, Iowa, was the unit of the community assigned to offer prayer and supplications on behalf of the requests received by the community. In the first issue of the *Signal*, Jones wrote:

“Dear Friends: If you are not a member of the S.O.S. Prayer League, we want you to join us. Are you in trouble, ill, afflicted or distressed? No matter what your burden, remember God can meet your need. Just write us about it. We are waiting to pray for you and with you.”⁴¹¹

Stirlen urged members to participate in the Prayer League and encouraged participation in various ways, including touting the results of the subgroup’s work. In a column labeled, *Around the Mercy Seat*, Mrs. R.G. Haney, who, along with her late

⁴¹⁰ *Vine’s Complete Expository Dictionary of Old and New Testament Words*, s.v. “Fellowship.”

⁴¹¹ *S.O.S. Signal*, April 22, 1935, Box 14, Stirlen Papers.

husband, served as the first KFNF radio chaplains, wrote 40 in-depth prayer entries requesting everything from healing to the release from prison of a young husband who had a sick wife and a baby at home.⁴¹² Although there is a shift in the content of the magazine over the course of its history, prayer requests and testimonies of answered prayer were a constant feature of the publication.

In the *Signal*, members shared very personal stories similar to those that would have been shared within interpersonal relationships. Stirlen published letters she received or referenced one-on-one encounters with community members. While I trust some members submitted material and requested that their names and the specifics of their conditions not be shared, the majority imagined the sacramental space of the community as a safe one where they could unmask their fears, confess their faith, request prayer for illnesses, and share other personal issues. Stirlen's transparency within her radio sermons and magazine entries encouraged members to do the same, as contributors often shared very intimate details about their faith, health, financial issues, loneliness, and religious journeys.

Stirlen also shared her personal struggles and those of her family members. In her monthly *Open Letter* she allowed audience members to witness her grief as she dealt with a trash fire that took the life of her daughter, Wren; the illness and the December 12, 1967, death of her husband, Carl; and her individual maladies. During the 1967 holiday season, Stirlen began her broadcast:

Greetings, friends in Radio Land everywhere and may peace in every heart. Because I realize that many like myself have suffered bereavement in recent days I want to comfort you as I have been comforted if I possibly can. My husband Carl Stirlen was born April 24, 1890 and passed from this life Dec. 12, 1967. May

⁴¹² Mrs. R.G. Haney, "Around the Mercy Seat," *S.O.S. Signal*, 9-10, January 1947, Box 14, Stirlen Papers.

those of you who sorrow find comfort in this poem as I have been comforted. It is entitled, Should you go first.⁴¹³

The audience also had the opportunity to rejoice with their radio pastor as she celebrated the marriage of her daughters, the birth of their children, and other pivotal moments in her life. These stories allowed members to see the community as a space where they could share their joys as well as their pain.

Because of the memories and testimonies shared between Stirlen and her congregants, members imagined their community as compassionate and inclusive. Although the geographic location of Stirlen and her broadcast may have prevented the inclusion of many ethnic and racial minorities, community members represented a variety of economic backgrounds, disabilities, and denominations. Members like Jessie Young of the Masonic Home in Montgomery, Alabama, sought to correspond with other members using Braille, interpreted from what was read to her from the magazine that there were others just like her whom she could connect with.⁴¹⁴ Other community members had other physical ailments that prevented them from penning correspondence, so they also noted that their letters were written by family members or neighbors. Such actions provided letter writers an honorary membership of sorts into the community because of their role in constructing texts. While some letters may have been dictated verbatim, I suspect some were put in the words of the letter writer.

Stirlen consistently provided group members with their marching orders and while many interpretations of the orders may have existed there was at least a clear understanding of what was expected from group members. The pen pal relationships

⁴¹³ Untitled and undated sermon from private collection.

⁴¹⁴ Jesse Young, "Jesse Young, Masonic..." *S.O.S. Signal*, February 1936, Box 14, Stirlen Papers.

initiated within the *Signal* was a community component used to introduce others to the principles of Christianity as well as to foster fellowship within the group. Stirlen often listed individuals needing cards, letters, or what she often described as “cheer.” In some cases, members wrote letters to express their need for fellowship via written communication.

While Stirlen prescribed how they could physically and spiritually assist other members, there were various interpretations on how they went about bringing cheer and comfort to shut-ins and isolated members. Some members participated in the S.O.S. clubs in their respective communities while others worked independently to fulfill their obligations to the radio church and the collective body of Christian believers.

The testimonies of community members were consistent features of the magazine, and these entries suggested how members could participate in one way or another in the community. Testimony is a biblical concept where Christians share their stories of sacrifice, trials, and tribulations in an effort to strengthen the faith of others and substantiate God’s grace and providence.⁴¹⁵ Often verbal contributions within a Christian worship service and more prevalent in traditional black churches, the magazine served as a forum for members to discuss what God and the community had done for them. In some instances, community members viewed Stirlen’s work as an independent effort and not as a communal work. Stirlen constantly worked to correct such views and consistently reminded members that she could not do this work alone. If community members suspected Stirlen did not need their support, it would have been easy to

⁴¹⁵ See Revelation 12:11 of the Christian Bible, which is the scripture Christians base the need for sharing the trials and tribulations of life for the greater good.

withdraw their existing financial, discontinue letter writing, and discontinue the work of the S.O.S. clubs, all of which were necessary for the community to exist.

Evangelism

Proclaiming the Christian message and sharing the plan of salvation with non Christians so they would come in fellowship with Jesus Christ is the goal of evangelism.⁴¹⁶ Stirlen evangelized each day on her radio program and the call for readers to repent and surrender to Jesus Christ was a consistent topic found within the *Signal* in both the material written by Stirlen and the correspondence she received.

Mrs. John Cooper of Wymore, Nebraska, wrote that she had been praying that her “dear boy would accept Christ so she tuned into the broadcast one Sunday morning she asked her son if he was ready to sign a “confession of faith” card, which Stirlen sent out and included in the magazine.⁴¹⁷ She testified:

We listened to your wonderful prayer and talk. I seemed you were talking right into our hearts. As soon as you had finished the Sunday School lesson, he picked up the cards and signed them. Am sending my rededication card also. I made my confession twenty some years ago. I feel so much nearer the dear Saviour since hearing your sermons and working in the S.O.S. work.⁴¹⁸

A letter published in the June 1938 edition introduced the “Foreign Corner of S.O.S” with a letter from Auckland, New Zealand. The writer, an 18-year-old identified as being crippled most of her life, solicited the help of a friend to write the following letter: “I would love to join the S.O.S., and would appreciate a picture of Edythe Stirlen.

⁴¹⁶ Paulus Scharpff, *History of Evangelism: Three Hundred Years of Evangelism in Germany, Great Britain and the United States of America*, trans. Helga Bender Henry (Grand Rapids, Michigan: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., 1964), 3.

⁴¹⁷ Mrs. John Cooper, “Dear Little Minister, *S.O.S. Signal*, June 1940, Box 14, Stirlen Papers.

⁴¹⁸ *Ibid.*

She must be a wonderful woman. What a lot of things you have in the U.S.A. that we don't have here. S.O.S. for instance.”⁴¹⁹

Shut-in Charlotte Belden, the foreign corner secretary, mailed the young woman a complimentary copy of the *Signal* and let her know she was the “shut-in member living the greatest distance from KMA.”⁴²⁰ Because some readers were not able to fellowship with the others during the daily broadcasts, the magazine provided the messages of communion originally shared during the radio program and images that provided members an aesthetic to help them better envision their imagined religious community.

Unlike the larger audiences of KMA and KFNF, whose communities were more public and stable, Stirlen's community was what Lindlof called “less intentional and less available to public inspection.”⁴²¹ The stability of the community was dependent on the publication, which chronicled the community's instability over time. Lindlof contended, “[I]nterpretive communities based in media competencies may be less stable over time than traditional communities.”⁴²² During the summer months when interference disrupted the broadcast and work and vacation schedules complicated listening to the radio program, Stirlen had to remind community members that their financial support was still needed for the work of the community.

Stirlen's radio ministry relied on the financial contributions of the community and the magazine depended on the correspondence to maintain and the grow community.

⁴¹⁹ Miss “Mickey” Abel, “Auckland, New Zealand,” *S.O.S. Signal*, June 1938, Box 14, Stirlen Papers.

⁴²⁰ Ibid.

⁴²¹ Lindlof, *Interpretive Community*, 64.

⁴²² Ibid.

She reminded magazine readers that membership in the community was not seasonal. The correspondence also served to validate the popularity and significance of the *Radio Church of the Air* to prove to the radio station that her show was of value to listeners and the station needed the letters to prove to the Federal Communications Commission that the station was meeting its public interest, convenience, and necessity obligation.

In an editorial published in May 1940, Stirlen wrote: "I want to caution you again this spring that you do not neglect to keep up your correspondence with me for as you know the mail is counted every day and if the response is not good, Radio stations feel programs do not justify the time they have and for that reason some of your best loved programs are pushed around and even taken off of the air [*sic*]." ⁴²³

Time after time, the community responded to Stirlen's various pleas for support and complied by submitting letters or monetary donations, ordering or selling subscriptions to the *Signal*, ordering the catalogues or products of the nursery that owned KMA, or helping in one way or another to advertise the broadcast schedule of the radio program.

"Let every one be a 'Stand-by'":

Financing the Work of the Ministry

The collection and donation of tithes and offerings was another facet of the brick-and-mortar church replicated by the *Radio Church of the Air*. Jesus' ministry as well as the New Testament church depended on the financial contributions of believers. ⁴²⁴

Stirlen's community of followers was no different, according to the community's first

⁴²³ Edythe Stirlen, "A Little Chat With The Little Minister," *S.O.S. Signal*, May 1940, Box 14, Stirlen Papers.

⁴²⁴ See Luke 8:1-3.

historian, shut-in Charlotte Belden: “Free-will offerings are sent in by club members and friends in radio land, with which Edythe buys gifts for shut-ins and deserving members.”⁴²⁵

Stirlen raised money to provide radios and support to the shut-ins and finance the purchase of radio time. Stirlen constantly reinforced to members that the ministry was not hers alone and that each and every one were responsible for its financial support. Stirlen did not mince words when it came to telling the members exactly what she needed for them to do to satisfy their obligation. “Each day we need 6 people, from 4 states to respond with a letter and offering; Iowa, Nebr., Kan. and Mo. Long experience proves that these offerings average \$1 each.”⁴²⁶ In 1952 when it was time to renew her contract for time with KMA and KFNF, Stirlen asked the community: “Shall we drop one of the Sunday Broadcasts?” Stirlen could have independently made the decision about renewing the contract; however, she posed the question to the community with the expectation that they would respond with feedback and monetary contributions. No response or an insufficient amount of donations would have communicated that the community was not interested in continuing the programs. The imagined church brought their tithes and offerings to the storehouse so that the *Radio Church of the Air*'s bills could be paid.⁴²⁷

Stirlen shared scripture, outlined the financial situation of the radio ministry, and often used witty quotes, even if she found no humor in the financial affairs of her work.

⁴²⁵ Charlotte Belden, “The What-Why-Who-When-and where of S.O.S.,” *S.O.S. Signal*, April 22, 1935, Box 14, Stirlen Papers.

⁴²⁶ Edythe Stirlen, “Open Letter,” *S.O.S. Signal*, November 1950, 4, Box 15, Stirlen Papers.

⁴²⁷ See Malachi 3:10

“But [God] demands that you and I sow the seed – the Word. The burden is so heavy. Please do not leave it for just a few to hear. Let no one be a “By-stander”. Let every one be a “Stand-by,” she admonished. Stirlen made members aware of their role in financially maintaining the community as well as the community leader. Stirlen did not call her financial support a salary; however, like pastors of traditional churches she expected community members to assist her financially because she served as their spiritual leader.⁴²⁸

When radio codes prevented Stirlen from requesting donations to support the ministry, she could still reach the community through the *Signal* where she was the lone regulator. “Every time you withhold your monthly support you cripple the Broadcast. Stations will not have us on if we are ‘offensive with our soliciting for money’” [sic].⁴²⁹ According to a code adopted by the National Association of Broadcasters to self-regulate the industry, religious broadcasters were told they were “ethically bound not to make a direct appeal over the air.”⁴³⁰

The financing of radio in general was a hotly debated topic since the beginning of commercial broadcasting, and, while regulation aided in establishing boundaries, it did not automatically solve all of the problems regarding the financing of religious broadcasts. Religious broadcasters with the consent of the Federal Communications Commission attempted to regulate themselves and adhered to codes adopted by the National Religious Broadcasters and groups such as the Religious Work Study Group at

⁴²⁸ Stirlen often quoted the Apostle Paul and his writings to encourage financial contributions. See the following biblical texts: 1 Timothy 5:17 and 1 Corinthians 9:1-14.

⁴²⁹ Edythe Stirlen, “Open Letter,” *S.O.S. Signal*, November 1950, 4, Box 15, Stirlen Papers.

⁴³⁰ E. Jerry Walker, “Religious Broadcasting: A Manual of Techniques...A Guide to Those Who Prepare and Present Religious Programs (Washington, DC: National Association of Broadcasters, 1945), 17.

the Institute for Education by Radio in Columbus, Ohio. In May 1942, the latter agency suggested religious programs should seek the support of radio stations, as one way for the stations to adhere to the public interest, convenience, and necessity obligation mandated by the Radio Act of 1927. Additionally, it was not advisable for groups to form for the sole purchase of radio time. Rather, committees could finance a program that sought a sustaining time slot.⁴³¹ The code also suggested, “no regular religious radio programs should appeal over the air for contributions for the support of the radio program itself. Nor should a charge for sermons, pamphlets or religious objects, distributed through religious programs, be used by the sponsor as a means of raising funds.”⁴³² The accepted means of financing did not include the funding of programs by the audience. Yet, that did not stop religious broadcasters from asking their audience for donations. Stirlen may have avoided requesting money on air, but there were no rules prohibiting Stirlen from soliciting within the magazine.

To demonstrate that they were not simply bystanders in their fellowship, members found various ways to lighten the financial load. Subscribing to the *Signal* and submitting love offerings were the simple ways Stirlen raised funds for the ministry. Additionally, Stirlen asked members to purchase magazine subscriptions as gifts or by selling individual copies for a dime. Members requested copies, sold them, and reported back on how many were sold and purchased for distribution. Members saw the magazine as an evangelistic tool they could use to share Jesus Christ with nonbelievers or those unaffiliated with a church.

⁴³¹ Ibid., 17.

⁴³² Ibid.

Any item with an address attached could assist in building a mailing list, which could be used to distribute complimentary copies of the *Signal* in an effort to gain a subscriber and inevitably a community member. There were times during the ministry that the meanings of community norms were lost in translation by some. For example, some listeners and readers did not understand that Stirlen often showed her appreciation for their monetary gifts by responding with gifts such as a bookmark, religious book, or pamphlet. When people began returning gifts because they thought they were sent by mistake, Stirlen used the *Signal* to correct the misunderstanding and institute a new rule to prevent confusion in the future. She informed members that because of the confusion with contributors who did not understand the norms of the community, she would only send gifts when they were requested upon receipt of a donation.⁴³³ Stirlen often listed the gifts that were in her possession, and depending on the offer, she asked contributors to submit stamps or postage to help defray the cost of shipping.

Conclusion: “The S.O.S. Signal

Is as a Text Book That Teaches Many Lessons.”⁴³⁴

While Stirlen may have maintained circulation figures to gauge the readership of her magazine and the station used various methods to measure their listening audience, the imagined religious community was infinite. In addition to its domestic distribution, the *Signal* was also distributed overseas during wartime and correspondence suggests community members passed the magazine on to other family members and friends. Thus, it is evident that the *Signal* reached farther and had more influence in the maintenance of the imagined religious community.

⁴³³ Edythe Stirlen, “The ‘Why’ of It,” *S.O.S. Signal*, January 1946, Box 14, Stirlen Papers.

⁴³⁴ *S.O.S. Signal*, December 1964 /January 1965, 14.

As Stirlen's time on the radio decreased and the medium began to compete with television, the community became more dependent on the *Signal* to maintain its interpretive work and existence. In 1950, Stirlen informed the community, "Time was when Radio Programs were heard all over the U.S. and of course the response was quick and gratifying. Now the coverage is so small that every listener must feel responsibility."⁴³⁵ Community members assumed more financial responsibility for the ministry and the *Signal's* role expanded as Stirlen was heard in fewer homes and for shorter periods.

As time passed, Stirlen's community members, including members of her family, wrote fewer letters and submitted even less written material for the magazine. "You will miss seeing the 'Family Circle' this time as my family is all 'going modern.' They call me up instead of writing letters," Stirlen wrote in the December 1977-January 1978 issue of the *Signal*.

The lack of available content for publication and readership did not change the fact that Stirlen symbolically maintained the pulpit of the *Signal* from its founding until she ceased both the radio program and the publication of the magazine. It was through the *Signal* that existing community members operated as an imagined religious community and new members became indoctrinated. While the radio broadcast initiated the images of communion the audience used to envision themselves as an audience, the magazine provided visual elements and text to reaffirm this belonging and allowed members an additional venue for worship in the *Radio Church of the Air*.

The *Signal's* annual subscription rate remained at \$1 from 1935 to 1952. A rate increase was announced in the January 1952 issue. The new subscription rate of \$2 may

⁴³⁵ Edythe Stirlen, "Open Letter," *S.O.S. Signal*, November 1950, 4.

have been the result of the debt incurred the previous year by having for the first time programs on both KMA and KFNF. In the February 1952 issue, Stirlen apologized to the community for not announcing on air that the Sunday School program on KFNF was being abbreviated by 15 minutes because of the cost.⁴³⁶ She wrote, “I did not have the necessary courage to tell it on air. I am glad you were concerned enough to notice it.”⁴³⁷ Stirlen went on to share that even if \$50 more a month came in, it would still not be enough to offset the \$2,300 deficit from the previous year.⁴³⁸ Once again, Stirlen reminded members of their financial responsibility. “I am more than willing to do the work if you will back of it financially. Every thing is much higher this year. Give as liberally as you can and do give regularly. It is to the glory of God that we learn to do this thing. God bless you all. Pray for me. I need your understanding love and prayers.”⁴³⁹ This would not be the first nor would it be the last time financial woes hindered Stirlen’s work.

Although the broadcast was at the core of the *Radio Church of the Air*, Stirlen relied on the magazine to disseminate the necessary information to grow and maintain the community, as well as clarify any misinterpretations that may have taken place through one of the other mediums used by the imagined religious community.

⁴³⁶ A Sunday School program was also airing on KMA at the time, but Stirlen explained that it was important for them to maintain both programs because the programs were different and listeners would have “a much better rounded out lesson” if they heard both.

⁴³⁷ Edythe Stirlen, “Open Letter,” *S.O.S. Signal*, February 1952, 5, Stirlen Papers.

⁴³⁸ *Ibid.*

⁴³⁹ *Ibid.*, 6.

CHAPTER 8

“FAITH IN ACTION”: SEND OUT SUNSHINE CLUBS

You know I think of this as a whole Church with different departments representing different phases of the church work. There is the Prayer League under Opal’s direction. It’s our prayer meeting. The S.O.S. department is a combination of the ladies aid and Missionary Society, and of course we have our Sunday School every Sunday 9:00 o’clock and Sunday evening Vesper at 6:00 P.M.

Elsie Wilson, *S.O.S. Signal*, September 1938

In previous generations, women’s clubs and organizations like the S.O.S. Club were instrumental agents in caring for the poor and bereaved in their respective communities. For those without families, the women in these organizations provided material as well as emotional and spiritual support. Prior to the passage of the Social Security Act on August 14, 1935, the traditional sources of economic security consisted of “assets; labor; family; and charity.”⁴⁴⁰ However, if an American did not possess money, was unable to work, or had no loved ones, he or she depended on the charity of the community.

Neighbors and religious communities may have offered aid, but another kind of charity at work in some Midwestern communities was the aid provided by Stirlen and her *Radio Church of the Air* community through their charitable organization, the S.O.S. Club. For eight years Stirlen hosted the annual clubs meet in Shenandoah as a way for the imagined radio church community to connect, interact, assess the work of the previous year, and memorialize those who had died since their last meeting.⁴⁴¹

⁴⁴⁰“Economic Security in America,” <http://www.ssa.gov/history/briefhistory3.html> accessed November 14, 2008.

⁴⁴¹ Seven states were represented at the fifth convention held in Shenandoah, according to a news clip reporting on the upcoming event.

The S.O.S. Club was a prominent feature of the imagined religious community from the beginning of Stirlen's KMA radio program to 1943, when Stirlen announced that the efforts of the clubs would have to divert from their domestic mission work and shift to keeping her on the air.⁴⁴² This chapter will interrogate the interpretive and physical work of the S.O.S. clubs by answering the following questions: How did the work of the physical clubs contribute to the formation of the *Radio Church of the Air's* imagined religious community? How did the clubs help to expand and sustain Stirlen's media ministry?

History of Radio Clubs

Radio organizations, which mirrored fan clubs, were prominent features of early radio. Broadcast historian Erik Barnouw suggested that the clubs "provided a fantastic mailing list, an organization and the spine for a political movement."⁴⁴³ One religious broadcaster whose political messages were more prominent than his theology is the controversial broadcaster Father Charles E. Coughlin of Royal Oak, Michigan, who extended membership for his Radio League of the Little Flower to enrollees who contributed "one dollar per person per broadcast" to affiliate with his radio congregation.⁴⁴⁴

In 1928 when KFNF and KMA sought to gain the attention of the newly formed Federal Radio Commission, they organized their radio friends into leagues in an effort to "seek equal rights for independent stations who felt that the needs of the chains were

⁴⁴² Edythe Stirlen, "These Changing Times," *S.O.S. Signal*, February 1943, Box 14, Stirlen Papers.

⁴⁴³ Erik Barnouw, *The Golden Web: A History of Broadcasting in the United States, Volume II-1933 to 1953* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1968), 49.

⁴⁴⁴ Donald Warren, *Radio Priest: Charles Coughlin, the Father of Hate Radio* (New York: Free Press, 1996), 27.

superseding those of independent stations.⁴⁴⁵ “The chains have protected wave lengths while the independent have weaker ones and more handicaps,” reported the local newspaper. Members paid no fees and the listener-initiated organizations had no officers. KMA listeners were identified as the “Trust Busters” and KFNF listeners were called the “Independents.”⁴⁴⁶ Lists of names were gathered and sent to Washington, D.C. to show the Federal Radio Commission that their listeners appreciated the stations.

Radio organizations helped listeners connect with their radio programs and the broadcasters whom the listeners viewed as their friends. The Golden Rule Radio Circle was a component of KFNF’s original religious broadcast and it was estimated that 2,000 members had joined the organization within the first three months of 1925.⁴⁴⁷ Members were described as “a union of folks by means of Radio,” which included 400 employees of Field’s seed house who committed themselves to follow the Golden Rule of treating others as they would want to be treated.⁴⁴⁸ Members subscribed to the Circle’s publication and listened to the weekly services of the Rev. C.S. Hanley, who was KFNF’s first radio chaplain.⁴⁴⁹ Hanley’s wife Minnie continued the work of the organization after his death on August 9, 1925.⁴⁵⁰

⁴⁴⁵ “Two Listeners Leagues Formed,” *The Evening Sentinel*, Jan. 4, 1928, 1.

⁴⁴⁶ *Ibid.*

⁴⁴⁷ “The Golden Rule Radio Circle,” *The Golden Rule Microphone*, April 1925, 6, Box 5, Folder 11, HFP SHSI.

⁴⁴⁸ *Ibid.*; Two scriptures served as the foundation of the organization’s motto, Matthew 7:12 and Luke 10:27.

⁴⁴⁹ *Ibid.*

⁴⁵⁰ *Studio and Broadcasting Station KFNF*, n.d., GSHS; “Golden Rule Pastor dies; Ill Long Time”, *The-Golden-Microphone*, July and August 1925, Box 5, Folder 11, HFP SHSI.

Popular radio preachers did not need a church or a denominational affiliation to attract listeners to their causes and ministries.⁴⁵¹ They monopolized on their personalities and their messages that promoted the benefits of supporting and joining in on the work of their ministries. The Rev. James “the Newsboy” Pearson, who became KFNF’s radio pastor after Hanley’s death, did not have his own church but led two station-affiliated organizations, the Radio Sunday School Class and the Radio Mission Church.⁴⁵² Pearson explained: “It is true the organization cannot have all the officers and activities that a more local organization could have, but we have obtained satisfactory results in promoting certain lines of thought and also a closer friendship and fellowship by organization.”⁴⁵³ Over the years, Pearson also printed various publications and held conferences and conventions that allowed his listening audience to fellowship. Based on the materials surveyed, Pearson’s community was not as defined or visible as Stirlen’s *Radio Church of the Air*.

The predecessor to Stirlen’s shut-in club was the Sunshine Circle, which was coordinated by a blind boy named Minor Clites, a musician who, along with his mother, Mrs. Edith Pearson, hosted a 30-minute program on Fridays on KFNF to “scatter a little sunshine” to homebound listeners.⁴⁵⁴ In 1929, Gertrude Hayzlett became the “Sunshine Lady” and assumed the responsibility of KFNF’s Sunshine Club, which came under the

⁴⁵¹ Schultz, “Evangelical Radio and the Rise of the Electronic Church, 1921-1948,” 289.

⁴⁵² Pearson not only served as the station’s religious leader but also as a newscaster known for reading reports from the local paper and *The Des Moines Register*.

⁴⁵³ James Pearson, *Radio Thoughts*, November 1927, 36. KFNF file, GSHS.

⁴⁵⁴ *Ibid.*, 38.

direction of Rev. Pearson.⁴⁵⁵ Based on the timeline of events, Hayzlett took up where Stirlen left off before Stirlen transitioned into her new role at KMA.⁴⁵⁶ Hayzlett's radio program targeted homebound listeners and those concerned about them.

While in the middle of negotiating the regulation of early commercial radio, Secretary of Commerce Herbert Hoover sought support for the "Cheerio morning broadcast of Good-Will," which was hosted by one of Hoover's "life long friends" Charles K. Field of San Francisco.⁴⁵⁷ Based out of California, the 1925 morning broadcast targeted shut-ins and people in hospitals.

Though the shut-ins offered stations an audience and their broadcasters a community of listeners, their demographic variables could not be equated with a viable consumer base. Because this demographic of listeners would not have had the financial means to purchase the consumer products advertised by the broadcaster and the station, the broadcasters had to have possessed an intrinsic interest in serving this group of listeners for the sole purpose of spiritual enrichment.

The S.O.S. Family⁴⁵⁸

Stirlen credited Leanna Field Driftmier, Henry Field's sister and the founder of the *Kitchen Klatter* program, as the person who gave her permission to proceed with re-

⁴⁵⁵ Gertrude Hayzlett, "Send Sunshine to Shut-ins," *CHIPS*, April 1938, 4, KFNF file, GSHS.

⁴⁵⁶ *Ibid.*, 38.

⁴⁵⁷ Herbert Hoover to Dr. J.S. Crumbine, October 23, 1925, 'Field, Charles K., 1921-1928' Commerce-Series-Herbert Hoover Papers, Herbert Hoover Presidential Library, West Branch, Iowa.

⁴⁵⁸ This is what Stirlen called the community in the June and July 1954 issue when she requested their input. She wrote, "We welcome suggestions. You are not just another reader. You are a member of the S.O.S. Family."

establishing KFNF's club that served infirmed listeners.⁴⁵⁹ Stirlen served as president of KFNF's shut-in club and developed two categories of memberships, one for shut-ins and another for well people. The able-bodied listeners were assigned the task of sending correspondence, purchasing radios, and remembering shut-ins in prayer and on special occasions like their birthdays. While it was not a requirement for membership, membership pins were available for fifty cents.⁴⁶⁰ Members received membership cards, which Stirlen suggested they hang on their walls to remember their spiritual commitment and bring others to Jesus Christ.

When Stirlen began working at KMA, she incorporated the framework of the S.O.S. club into her new work and this group was one of the core components of her imagined religious community. In an undated letter addressed to her KMA radio friends, Stirlen outlined the rationale for the organization and the responsibility of members:

I find that all communities are about the same in many respects. Everywhere we find the lonely, sad and forsaken. We also find the poor, the aged and the afflicted. It is such as these, we are trying to help through our Radio Church. For it is as our Master said, "The well need not a physician, but those who are sick." With this in mind, will you not sit down and write me a line telling me of some such persons in your community? Please. Then when we hear from you we will immediately get in touch with the persons whose names you sent and ask them if they would like to belong to our S.O.S. Club for shut-ins and if they answer in the affirmative we will secure for them "pen pals" who adopt them for life long friends. But cheer is not all we give them.⁴⁶¹

Even if individuals did not initially connect via the media ministry, they were invited to participate or, rather, be served by the imagined religious community. Stirlen desired to send them "cheer," which equated to gifts and letters. Many of Stirlen's shut-in

⁴⁵⁹ Edythe Swartz, "Sunshine For Shut-Ins by Edythe Swartz," *Kitchen Klatter News*, October 1929. Evelyn Birkby Collection, Iowa Women's Archives.

⁴⁶⁰ Henry Field Seed Company Correspondence, "Dear Friend," 1930, Box 5, Folder 11, HFP SHSI.

⁴⁶¹ Edythe Stirlen to "Dear Friends," n.d., Private collection.

members were either born disabled or were living with terminal illnesses that had no cures. Though Stirlen could offer them hope and encourage them to have faith in the healing power of God, these people needed the material cheer they received via the letters to get them through the other parts of the day when Stirlen was not on the air and they were not engaged with their community. Moreover, both the members who gave cheer and those who received cheer were benefactors in the *Radio Church of the Air*. Both parties provided a sense of community as well as spiritual support. For S.O.S. club members, such actions were more than fandom, but their actions mirrored church work and might have resulted in spiritual transformation.

Based on the interests of her community members, Stirlen could have easily started a new club targeting Bible readers, new Christian converts, or people who were simply committed to prayer. However, her own life experiences framed the focus of the community and helped her sympathize with listeners who needed a helping hand and were isolated or alone due to physical ailments or locality. Stirlen cited the loneliness she experienced as a child as one reason for targeting the infirmed and isolated through her radio ministry.⁴⁶² “Loneliness prepared my heart to love people; to want to make other people happy.”⁴⁶³ In a sermon broadcast on KFNF on February 13, 1948, she further explained her desire to reach out to what the Bible refers to as “the least of these.”⁴⁶⁴

When I first took up the ministry it was because I realized how much trouble there was in the world and [I] wanted to alleviate some of it. My direct work among the shut-ins. I tried to give each one a friend. I tried to have each one remembered with a gift. I tried to have each one in my radio audience but when they were too

⁴⁶² Stirlen, *The Little Minister's Devotional Selection*, 2.

⁴⁶³ Ibid.

⁴⁶⁴ See St. Matthew 25:37-40.

far away to hear my voice I knew with one of the radioes [*sic*] we gave them surely wherever they were they could hear one of God's servants.⁴⁶⁵

Interpreting the

Imagined Community of the S.O.S. Clubs

The literal “wink and the nod,” which takes place during the interpretive work of communities, consisted of cues embedded in Stirlen’s sermons and the text of the *Signal*, as the geographic distance and lack of face-to-face communication required the use of codes to interpret the images of communion that established the imagined religious community. The “images of communion” would have been the images or words that would have been communicated within the magazine or the radio program. Community members would have understood how to respond to them based on the interpretation gained from their engagement with the community. Stirlen’s use of the word cheer alerted listeners and readers that a sick or shut-in was in need of cards, letters, or possibly other material items.

Prior to the *Signal*, the clubs relied on the broadcast, letters, and interpersonal interactions to disseminate information concerning the community. With an added site of interpretation and the opportunity to access images of communion, club members could come to understand the needs of both Stirlen and those within their community. For example, S.O.S. leader Charlotte Belden, a shut-in from Rush City, advised other members on gifts needed by sick and shut-in members of the organization and communicated the plight of those who relied on radio as their connection to the outside world. “I offer the following suggestions, hoping that I may help to bring a bit of cheer to

⁴⁶⁵ Edythe Stirlen, sermon 118, Stirlen Papers; Stirlen radio broadcasts sermons 1940-1948, Box 4, Folder, 1, Stirlen Papers.

some shut-in, somewhere on Christmas morning. The shut ins room, as a rule is his own little world, that is he seldom gets out side [*sic*]. He has to look at the same four walls day after day, year in and year out. Life get's monotonous to say the least," wrote Belden.⁴⁶⁶

Stirlen made sure that the community interpreted the *Radio Church of the Air* as a joint venture between the broadcaster and her audience. She explained, "For every shut-in there are two 'workers'—that is, well persons interested in the club who help with the wardrobe and the child placement work."⁴⁶⁷ The Sunshine organization was also comprised of "prayer leagues," led by Opal Jones of Mystic, Iowa.⁴⁶⁸ Jones also used the *Signal* to expand the prayer efforts of the radio church and wrote in the first edition:

Dear Friends:

If you are not a member of the S.O.S. Prayer League, we want you to join us. Are you in trouble, ill, afflicted or distressed? No matter what your burden, remember God can meet your need. Just write us about it. We are waiting to pray for you and with you.⁴⁶⁹

The Prayer League helped listeners imagine that their prayer concerns were always on someone's agenda. Even if no one in their personal lives was concerned, their radio friends offered supplications on their behalf. By praying, shut-in members participated in the community. Without the use of their limbs, many of them could not visit or write other members, and if they were sick they would not be as able to participate financially. Yet, praying for other members was something that their disabilities or isolation did not prevent them from doing.

⁴⁶⁶ Charlotte Belden, "Gift Suggestions," *S.O.S. Signal*, December 1935, Box 14, Stirlen Papers.

⁴⁶⁷ Ibid.

⁴⁶⁸ Opal Jones, "Prayer League," *S.O.S. Signal*, April 22, 1935, Box 14, Stirlen Papers.

⁴⁶⁹ Ibid.

Shut-ins like Belden, who served as the club historian and secretary of the Foreign Corner, served the imagined religious community in ways they may have been prevented from in their physical communities. Because Henry Field and Earl May often illegally expanded the reach of their stations, listeners as far away as New Zealand could hear the program. Stirlen's community benefited from the wave jumping as new listeners took interest in the program and the work of the clubs.⁴⁷⁰ Moreover, copies of the *Signal* found their way overseas through friends sharing the publications with pen pals and soldiers at war. Efforts of the S.O.S. Club also stretched beyond the United States, as club members collectively supported an orphan in India via a mission in Findlay Ohio.⁴⁷¹

Clubs in distant places may have developed without Stirlen's knowledge, however, the clubs on record reported their activities to Stirlen and she published those reports in the *Signal*. The Lincoln, Nebraska, club was one of the more active chapters and their cheer and fundraising activities were prominently featured in the *Signal* along with photos submitted by the group. For example, in the April 1937 edition, the Lincoln chapter reported that between July 1936 and January 1937 they provided food to 11 families, distributed 75 Bibles, and made and distributed 72 Christmas boxes to Shut-ins and poor.⁴⁷²

The imagined religious community not only consisted of adults but also children who listened with their parents or on their own because they, too, were shut-ins. In March 1936, a junior branch of the S.O.S. club formed to address the needs of adolescent shut-

⁴⁷⁰ To gauge how far their programs traveled, the stations would sponsor contests to determine the location of their furthest listener,

⁴⁷¹ "Send your offerings for the support," *S.O.S. Signal*, February 1944, Box 4, Stirlen Papers.

⁴⁷² Ruby L. Gardner, "Report on What the Lincoln Branch of the S.O.S. Club Did," *S.O.S. Signal*, April 1937. Box 14, Stirlen Papers

ins.⁴⁷³ Elsie Wilson, a teacher from Topeka, Kansas, who missed the broadcast because she was teaching when the program aired, oversaw the junior division and used the *Signal* to recruit both children and adults who sent cheer or corresponded with junior S.O.S. members.⁴⁷⁴ Wilson noted “We are looking for children to be workers. I wonder if some of you older members would not like to take the name of a child and be a grandparent to them.”⁴⁷⁵

Stirlen explained the structure of the organization through her *Open Letter* column in the *Signal* as well as through dramatic works performed on air. “Our members are divided into wheels, each having a chairman and none have less than 10 and many have 20 members. Each member often has a wheel. So we have wheels in wheels. So that [sic] by notifying these 85 each month we reach thousands through the mail by relays, read a skit before performed for listeners before the 1938 S.O.S. convention.”⁴⁷⁶

In 1941, Stirlen explained that organizing the members were important so that they could be efficient with their outreach. Stirlen explained that if the “captain” or “hub” of each wheel could help her communicate each month’s projects with the members, who were considered “spokes.”⁴⁷⁷ The projects in question would be their assignment to a specific shut-in. “It is the only way to distribute the cheer so one shut in will not receive too much and another nothing at all,” Stirlen explained.

⁴⁷³ Elsie Wilson, “Junior S.O.S.,” *S.O.S. Signal*, October 1936, Box 14, Stirlen Papers.

⁴⁷⁴ Elsie Wilson, “Junior S.O.S.,” *S.O.S. Signal*, March 1941, Box 14, Stirlen Papers.

⁴⁷⁵ Ibid.

⁴⁷⁶ Edythe Stirlen, “A little pre-convention skit given over air August 5, 1938,” *S.O.S. Signal*, September 1938, Box 14, Stirlen Papers.

⁴⁷⁷ “Attention Every Reader Please,” *S.O.S. Signal*, March 1941, Box 14, Stirlen Papers.

Although there were formally organized clubs or wheels, Stirlen rarely commented on the number of members within her community and individual members and clubs were not bound by the structure. Stirlen may have based the loose construction of the Club on the then loose construction of her Disciples of Christ denomination, which initially allowed individual congregations to control both the ordination of their local ministers and the work within those congregations.

The Membership Roster

When numbers were reported, they were the estimates of writers reporting on the club. Letters and other information printed in the *Signal* suggest the majority of participants lived in Iowa and in surrounding states. KMA biographer Robert Birkby suggested that the S.O.S. clubs had a membership of more than 30,000 and a newspaper report announcing the seventh convention reported the club had 40,000 members.⁴⁷⁸

While counting listeners was very important to validate the popularity of her program during the years when the program received sustaining time to broadcast, the only numbers that counted after this time was the amount of money she could raise. Without a salary from the radio station or its parent company, Stirlen needed the community to pay for airtime, administrative costs associated with the ministry, and provide her remuneration. Stirlen also used donations she received to purchase items distributed in the name of the S.O.S. clubs. "Sunshine radios," which were simply radios purchased and distributed to those in need, were one of the key items purchased with those funds. Keeping community members connected was important to the community's survival, and Stirlen made sure that homes without a radio could connect and that homes

⁴⁷⁸ Birkby, *KMA Radio*, 97; "SOS Club to Meet Here," publication unknown, n.d., Box 1, Stirlen Papers; Biographical Information; Scrapbooks; 1931-1937, Stirlen Papers.

with broken radios could stay connected. Used radios were distributed and club funds purchased radio batteries and tubes and paid for radio repairs, as the medium was the only way that community members could tune into Stirlen's broadcast.

The community also paid electric bills and purchased a variety of items including, but not limited to, quilts, wheelchairs, ice for those without electricity, birds that offered companionship, batteries for wheelchairs, typewriters, wallpaper, seeds to plant gardens, and other various items requested by those in need. Under the heading, *Radio Stories*, Stirlen informed members of the needs of others within their community. Members contacted Stirlen and the "well" members knew when and how to respond. Through her appeals, Stirlen articulated to community members that they were helping their own and often attempted to illustrate how their responses would affect the lives of fellow community members. :

Juanita Grimes, invalid shut-in, has long been a faithful worker in our S.O.S work for the Lord. Her radio is now worn out and she cannot keep very closely in touch with us because she is unable to write much. I feel we should replace this radio, don't you?⁴⁷⁹

Grimes, who resided at the Wheat Ridge Sanatorium in Denver, Colorado, remained a member of the community for many years. Five years after receiving her radio, Stirlen was excited to report that Grimes married a man who had returned from World War II and they would make their home in Summit, Arkansas.⁴⁸⁰

Stirlen joined her community members in the trenches and may have actually visited listeners like Grimes to make sure that the radio was received or to follow-up with a personal session of care and prayer. These visits were publicized when the community met face-to-face in Shenandoah for the annual S.O.S. conventions, which were held from

⁴⁷⁹ Edythe Stirlen, "Radio Stories," *S.O.S. Signal*, February 1942, Box 14, Stirlen Papers.

⁴⁸⁰ Edythe Stirlen, "Open Letter, *S.O.S. Signal*, December 1947, 10, Box 14, Stirlen Papers.

1931 to 1939. Held during the first week of August, the events of the two-day meeting were held at local parks and services were broadcast on air. Convention programs not broadcast were held at the First Christian Church, the local church where Stirlen was a member and Sunday School teacher. Meetings included prayer and song services, dramatic presentations, preaching, a memorial service for deceased members, and the reading of confession of faith cards, which Stirlen read over the air. In the year prior to the 1938 convention, Stirlen received 500 cards, mostly from shut-ins who could not attend church but wanted to profess that they now embraced Christianity.⁴⁸¹ Stirlen also performed the Christian rite of baptism for interested attendees.

Stirlen also participated in what was called pre-convention calling week, which involved Stirlen conducting face-to-face visits with sick and shut-ins in her local area. Before the 1936 convention, Stirlen, her daughters, and S.O.S club officers Elsie Wilson and Opal Jones visited shut-ins and club members in Council Bluffs and nearby towns before the convention festivities began.⁴⁸²

Conclusion

The work of the S.O.S. clubs was not just imagined or intangible; rather, it was a work both felt and seen by members of the imagined religious community and members of the larger community. For example, in 1939 the State Social Security Commission of Missouri wrote Stirlen to thank the community on behalf of one of their clients who received a radio. The letter was reprinted in the *Signal* and read, "As you know, Mr. wright [*sic*] is bedfast and the radio helps him pass what would otherwise be long hours.

⁴⁸¹ "Delegates are arriving on every train," *S.O.S. Signal*, September 1938, Box 14, Stirlen Papers.

⁴⁸² "MRS. EDYTHE STIRLEN AND daughters," July 1936, miscellaneous newspaper clipping, Box 1, Folder 1, Stirlen Papers.

Being nearly blind it is impossible for him to read. Your thoughtfulness to our client is very much appreciated.”⁴⁸³

Although there was an S.O.S. Club program on KMA’s schedule for a brief period, most of the organization’s work was done off air. Yet, what was taking place on air was just as important as the work that was taking place off air. The impact of Stirlen’s on-air ministry could be measured not only by the number of listeners tuning in, but also by the activities taking place in local communities as a result of Stirlen promoting an agenda of service to what the Bible refers to as “the least of these.”⁴⁸⁴

Even after Stirlen requested that clubs refocus their efforts in 1943, she could not delete the memory of the clubs. Church work within the various communities continued; however, it did so with limited financial support. The language and images of communion were already established, which enabled clubs to operate using the existing framework.

In addition to the benefits individual members and the people they served received, the S.O.S. Clubs helped substantiate Stirlen’s ministry as more than just a radio program. For Stirlen and the community, their work responded to Jesus’ challenge to His disciples: “for I was hungry and you gave me food, I was thirsty and you gave me something to drink, I was a stranger and you welcomed me, I was naked and you gave me clothing, I was sick and you took care of me, I was in prison and you visited me.”⁴⁸⁵

Baffled by what they thought Jesus said they had already done, Jesus explained to them

⁴⁸³ “State Social Security,” *S.O.S. Signal*, October 1939, Box 14, Stirlen Papers.

⁴⁸⁴ See St. Matthew 25:40

⁴⁸⁵ Matthew 25:34-36 (New Revised Standard Version).

that if they had performed any of the acts to the poor among them or what Jesus Christ called “the least of these,” then they had performed these acts toward Him.⁴⁸⁶

By listening and reading about Stirlen’s actions as well as those of her community, others imagined Stirlen and the *Radio Church of the Air* lived out the tenets of the Christian faith. Moreover, the club activity clearly confirmed that Stirlen served the public interest of her imagined religious community on air as well as in real life.

⁴⁸⁶ See Matthew 25:45-46.

CHAPTER 9

CONCLUSION

92 years, 5 months, 16 days: A Time to Live

The Rev. Edythe Stirlen remained on KMA for much of her radio career. By 1981, she had watched many broadcasters of all genres come and go. Moreover, she had experienced the death of many congregants. In some cases, their children continued to listen to her programming, but, by the end of her years on-air, televangelists dominated the world known as religious broadcasting. They, too, created imagined communities as viewers pledged to become partners in their ministries and visit their physical locations.

The world and radio industry in which Stirlen entered had drastically changed, and for Stirlen, those changes brought with it programming disruptions and financial challenges. Unlike Stirlen's early audience, people were not as isolated and advances in medicine had provided cures for people who would have previously been isolated. Moreover, KFNF was sold numerous times and its last owner removed Stirlen's program from the schedule. On December 30, 1976, Stirlen received a letter from Family Stations, Inc., that the station would no longer carry paid religious broadcasting and her broadcast would no longer air after January 8, 1977.⁴⁸⁷ Stirlen sent a copy of the letter to her daughter, Josephine, with the following handwritten note: "I will not call. I will not say goodbye! My friends will have to write to me for an explanation."⁴⁸⁸

To announce the cancellation would be to acknowledge defeat, and Stirlen's perseverance throughout her radio career suggests she approached challenges both naturally and spiritually and did not allow them to overtake her. As a minister of the

⁴⁸⁷ Edythe Stirlen to Josephine Fischer, 30, Dec 1976. In the author's possession.

⁴⁸⁸ Ibid.

Gospel, she trusted that the Lord would fight her battles and oftentimes her community served as her soldiers, who protected her from various threats of the radio industry.⁴⁸⁹

Even with the cancellation of that program, Stirlen maintained the 15-minute Sunday School broadcast on KMA. Though the physical presence of the clubs diminished, community members maintained their affiliation with the imagined radio church for many years. Moreover, membership in the community was often generational. A letter writer from Kansas City, Kansas, provided an example of the longevity of some communal ties:

It was 49 years ago this spring that I first wrote you from Horton, Kansas, and you sent me a list of shutin members to write to. Think of all the letters I have written to you! The first was when I was 13. I am now 63. Maybe you should start a “Thank you” basket in the S.O.S. Signal...⁴⁹⁰

During the final years of publication, the magazine was no longer offered by subscription. It was “sent free, upon request, for a donation of \$2.00 or more. In case the Radio Church must discontinue, all monies will be used to pay outstanding bills.”⁴⁹¹

On December 1, 1981, Stirlen, 86, wrote her oldest daughter Josephine and asked her to review a letter she had composed to send out to community members. The letter was addressed “Dear Christian friends.” She explained that the magazine’s printer, “who has printed it from the beginning” was ill and could no longer provide service. “Realizing that there could be no further publication of the S.O.S. Signal, put me to bed, sick for several days....,” she wrote, adding that she had only charged \$2 for the magazine, had

⁴⁸⁹ See 2 Chronicles 32:8.

⁴⁹⁰ “Excerpts from the Letter Basket,” *S.O. S. Signal*, April/May 1978, 9, Box 16, Stirlen Papers.

⁴⁹¹ *S.O.S. Signal*, October / November 1981, 2, Box 16, Stirlen Papers.

taken no salary for the radio ministry, and that the broadcast had “not been paying its way.”⁴⁹² Stirlen called her endeavor “a faith ministry” and noted:

Since the S.O.S. Signal can not [*sic*] be published any longer, the future of the Broadcast is uncertain. If the Broadcast must discontinue we will need financial help to defray the expenses of office help to answer the heavy correspondence which this letter will bring [*sic*].⁴⁹³

The letter was also a last ditch effort to sell copies of the two books that she had self-published three years earlier. Illnesses over the course of her career, the challenges of broadcasting, and, subsequently, old age, had tired Stirlen. In the letter to her daughter, Stirlen explained, “I’m not sending cards or gifts to Radio friends. Too tiring.”⁴⁹⁴ By then, Stirlen’s health was failing due to a stroke and other ailments; however, that did not stop her from desiring to continue the work of the ministry. After more than 50 years of radio and ministry work, Stirlen, too, could say the words of the Apostle Paul nearing the end of his ministry: “I have fought the good fight, I have finished the race, I have kept the faith.”⁴⁹⁵ Stirlen’s final KMA broadcast aired December 27, 1981.⁴⁹⁶

A Time to Mourn

Stirlen’s long-time secretary, Eleanor Good, was rarely mentioned in the magazine but family and friends speak fondly of her when discussing her allegiance to Stirlen and her ministry. When Stirlen died, Good contacted people like Nadine Dreager, who started the *Golden Age of Radio* reunions in 1977. Good wrote, “Perhaps you have

⁴⁹² Edythe Stirlen to Josephine Fischer, 1, Dec. 1981. In the author’s possession.

⁴⁹³ Ibid.

⁴⁹⁴ Ibid.

⁴⁹⁵ 2 Timothy 4:7 (New Revised Standard Version).

⁴⁹⁶ Birkby, *Neighboring on he Air*, 24.

not heard about our dear Edythe, but I feel sure you will want to know. She is not suffering now, and is with her Maker whom she loved and served for many years.”⁴⁹⁷

Homegrown Radio Outgrows Its Problems

The case of Stirlen’s service to the radio industry and the imagined radio church community is a reminder of the thousands of marginalized voices that had to shout through the chaos of the early industry and fight to keep their voices heard amidst the powerful networks that eventually silenced many of them along with television.

Stirlen’s case is an exemplar of the independent religious broadcaster who maintained a presence on commercial radio without the financial support of a denomination, physical church, or radio station. Independent religious broadcasters like Stirlen were not rare. However, the amount of material available to study Stirlen and her career was an exception that made this study a rich example to examine how independent broadcasters survived in the midst of an unregulated medium that had the potential to benefit both listener and broadcaster. The stories of the broadcasters have found their way into broadcasting historiography, yet the voices of the listeners remain muted. We know what was going into their ears, however, we know very little about how they responded to and acted on what was being heard. This case suggests that, like the early disciples in the Bible, after hearing their marching orders, the members of Stirlen’s imagined community proceeded with the tasks of fellowship, sharing the Gospel, and keeping the radio program on the air.

The data available from this study allowed the listeners to share, in their own words, the meaning they attached to radio. Thus, listeners studied as community members are examined as more than numbers or radio sets. This study has provided a

⁴⁹⁷ Eleanor Good to Nadine Dreager, October 8, 1987, private collection.

glimpse at who made up the religious broadcast audience by providing us an understanding of the issues taking place in their homes and communities while also exploring the climate in which the radio stations they listened to evolved.

Moreover, listeners are examined for their engagement with radio beyond comedy and entertainment programs which help us understand some of the contributing factors to their deeply developed listening habits. Stirlen's listeners developed a ritual of listening that transferred to other programs on the former stations. By engaging in Stirlen's community, they learned how to not only listen to radio, but they also learned how to engage with the medium and its producers. That engagement, however, could not be documented by Hooper ratings, which was the system of measuring listenership of early radio.

The "images of communion" for Stirlen's *Radio Church of the Air* were not always visual, which is often what is expected of an image. Rather, Stirlen's congregants took in the messages from the radio broadcast, those communicated during their face-to-face interactions with the Send Out Sunshine Club members, and combined the interpretations with those messages read and seen in the *S.O.S. Signal Magazine* to build the images of communion that would hold the community together. Thus, with those messages, they envisioned themselves in fellowship with people they may have never met face-to-face. For the shut-ins, the community reaffirmed that they were not alone as they dealt with physical infirmities that kept them from participating in the day-to-day activities of public life. For the shut-in who could use the pages of the *Signal* to sell their wares or share their inspirational messages and poetry, it was a way for them to feel validated in a world where the American with Disabilities Act had yet to come into

fruition. The *Radio Church of the Air* not only provided access to life outside of their spaces of affliction, but the community provided them a space where their lives, gifts and talents were valued and appreciated. Each day on her radio program, Stirlen reminded them that they were valuable not only to God, but also to this imagined community they may have never encountered.

By examining the images of communion they used to construct and maintain their community, we begin to understand an audience that was more than listeners tuning in at a certain time during the day. The images identified and used to make sense of the imagined community help us make sense of this period in radio history and understand the things that mattered to its listeners. For example, we learn that actual radio sets were a commodity and that not all families, especially ones with sick members, could easily afford to buy and repair them. The financial distress being experienced by the radio audience and other Americans did not go unnoticed within this community. The way in which they responded within their community furthers our understanding of how Americans coped during the Great Depression, and, more specifically, how the new medium of radio assisted with that process. The religious programs of the times provided spiritual edification, the comedies helped the country laugh through the financial woes, and the nation's president used the airwaves to keep his country informed and encouraged about the circumstances at hand.

Classroom instruction could not teach Stirlen how to manufacture an imagined church community. It was only through immersion in the farm radio culture that she could gain the understanding needed to create this community. Although radio personalities of the time were able to create a culture of fandom, Stirlen's community

illustrates how listeners wanted to be attached to something that consisted of more than a signed photograph and station trinkets; listeners want to belong to something that was not only bigger than them, but also bigger than the institution of radio. With the Send Out Sunshine Clubs, the *Radio Church of the Air* lived out the gospel Stirlen preached about and enabled them to strengthen their local community ties. The images of community created via the mass mediums were translated and acted on to not only benefit those whom they interacted with via the radio ministry but also those they encountered in their local communities. Moreover, radio helped community members to live purpose-driven lives that affected their families and their brick-and-mortar churches. Instead of being the passive listener, they became active listeners, both literally and figuratively.

It can only be speculated what Stirlen's imagined *Radio Church of the Air* would have become if she had been given the opportunity to broadcast via one of the major radio networks or utilize television. Perhaps her connection with her listeners would not have gone off as well on television or the Internet. Not because of her message, but, rather because what community members envisioned may have been different than what they expected. Unlike the televangelists of the past 30 years who have often flaunted their wealth while crediting God for their blessings, Stirlen lived a rather modest life. However, her life was probably more comfortable than many of her rural listeners. Stirlen was described as a woman who was always stylishly dressed and well-coiffed, which may have not been as easy to detect in the *Signal* or during brief visits during the S.O.S. conventions. Many would have been unaware of exactly how a female preacher "looked," as there were few public images of female preachers beyond Aimee Semple McPherson that they could use as a comparison.

Possibilities for the Future

More work must be done to focus on religious radio within the culture of the interwar years. I believe that if we spend more time studying religious programming of the interwar years we may get a better understanding of the spiritual struggles that took place in the nation.

As with any project of this magnitude and scope, there were limitations encountered during various phases of data-gathering and analysis. Stirlen's collection held a treasure of documents and artifacts to examine; however, I recognize that most of these materials and their messages were created for the public. Thus, they mostly showed the broadcaster and her audience in the best possible light. Moreover, the information published in the *Signal* was edited or filtered by Stirlen and her assistants.

Although I did have an opportunity to access a personal collection of artifacts still held by Stirlen's granddaughter, I could never locate a journal or personal calendar. While family members could recall how she spent her days as leader of the imagined radio church community, a journal would have helped me understand how she prepared for the broadcast, outside engagements, and conduct the work of the ministry. Documents in Eleanor Good's papers could have provided some of these answers as well as more information about the community; however, her belongings were auctioned off in October 2005. Documents suggest Stirlen and her staffers gave all of her members an individual number so she could keep track of their vitals; having some of those records would have helped to answer questions about the attachment to the community.

Reception studies are difficult projects to undertake and are even harder to conduct without living participants. Although correspondence and the responses of

listeners were available for this project, only a glimpse of their reactions, thoughts, and reception could be examined without interviews, surveys, or accessing more of their private documents. More oral histories could have been sought for this project; however, the passage of time has blurred and diminished memories of Stirlen and the imagined radio church community, but that would have enlarged the scope of this project considerably and taken it off to a different course.

As he reflected back on writing KMA's history for its 60th anniversary, Robert Birkby explained that in the process of creating programming as they went, Henry Field and Earl May realized something simple that contributed to the success of their homegrown brand of programming: people like to talk to each other.⁴⁹⁸ While other broadcasters sought to reach as many unnamed ears and faces as they could, Stirlen and her farm radio colleagues hoped listeners would feel like they were being reached as individual friends. In return, their listeners did more than simply tune into their programs, or in the case of Field and May, buy their products. By connecting with listeners both on air and within the publications created to engage listeners, broadcasters like Stirlen helped radio imitate a live experience. If ABC, CBS, and NBC created network radio, then KFNF and KMA, with the aid of Stirlen and with no blueprint, developed local radio. For that, their listeners and the radio industry at large were forever changed. Without listeners to "sell" to advertisers, radio could not evolve into the industry it came to be with a reach that exceeded other mediums until the arrival of the Internet.

Currently, ministers around the world use personal Web pages and Internet portals like Streamingfaith.com to communicate the gospel to those outside of their brick-and-mortar spaces of worship. Some like Christian Church (Disciples of Christ) Pastor

⁴⁹⁸ Robert Birkby, in discussion with the author, October 15, 2009.

Cynthia Hale of Decatur, Georgia, air their worship services online with an occasional reference to the online community while others intentionally welcome their online viewers into the services and solicit tithes and offerings.⁴⁹⁹

Although I originally thought these ministers were involved in a new phenomena when I began to study the media ministries of Joel Osteen and Bishop T.D. Jakes, this study proves otherwise. How contemporary pastors use the Internet is similar to Stirlen's use of the burgeoning medium of radio. Pastors like Hale publish newsletters and host conferences at their churches and travel to the places where their virtual congregants are. Having attended events sponsored by both Osteen and Jakes, I have personally experienced the large crowds that are in the tens of thousands. However, I never envisioned myself as a friend of either Jakes or Osteen. Although prayer requests can be submitted via their Web sites, I cannot envision them personally calling my name in prayer, or recalling months later the end result of my petition.

Yet, this was not the experience of listeners who tuned into KFNF and KMA to hear Edythe "the Little Minister" Stirlen, their radio pastor, neighbor, and a friend they could count on. The cultural history of KFNF and KMA is not solely a story of great men. Rather, it is a story of ordinary people like Stirlen and her community. For them, radio held more meaning than financial rewards or its intended technical meaning. Radio became more than the medium for a message to be transmitted to a receiver. Even with all of its political and structural challenges, radio helped its listeners live and create a deeper meaning for their lives. For the community of listeners who made up the *Radio*

⁴⁹⁹ I have also journeyed to a neighboring town to hear Hale preach, as we are Facebook friends and I regularly tune into her ministry online.

Church of the Air, radio helped to save their souls, comforted them through life's challenges, and increased their faith.

APPENDIX A

SEND OUT SUNSHINE CLUB MEMBERSHIP CARD

S_(send) O_(out) S_(sunshine) Club Membership Card


"WALK RIGHT IN"
 Good morning, Brother Sunshine,
 Good morning, Sister Song,
 I beg your humble pardon
 If you've waited very long!
 I thought I heard you rapping,
 To shut you out were sin—
 My heart is standing open,
 Won't you walk right in?

Good morning, Brother Gladness,
 Good morning, Sister Smile,
 They told me you were coming
 So I waited on a while.
 I'm lonesome here without you,
 A weary time it's been—
 My heart is standing open,
 Won't you walk right in?

Good morning, Brother Kindness,
 Good morning, Sister Cheer,
 I heard you were out calling,
 So I waited for you here.
 Some way I keep forgetting
 I have to toil or spin
 When you are my companions—
 Won't you walk right in?

SHUT IN

WORKER



EDYTHE SWARTZ-STIRLEN
 "The Little Minister of KMA"
 at Shenandoah, Iowa

I, _____, Hereby pledge myself to
 Life Membership in the S. O. S. Club of KMA, Shenandoah, Iowa

Figure A1. A membership card for the Send Out Sunshine (S.O.S) Club started by the Rev. Edythe Stirlen.

APPENDIX B

STIRLEN WITH COMMUNITY MAIL



Figure B1. Stirlen pictured with the mail she received from the imagined radio community.

Courtesy of Shenandoah Historical Museum

APPENDIX C

S.O.S. SIGNAL FRONT COVER (FIRST ISSUE)

Figure C1. Cover of *S.O.S. Signal* with Pastor Edythe Stirlen marrying couple during radio wedding on KMA.

Courtesy of Iowa Women's Archives, University of Iowa, Iowa City, Iowa.



APPENDIX D

STIRLEN PROMOTIONAL PHOTO



Figure D1. Image of Stirlen from a *Radio Church of the Air* advertisement.
Courtesy of Iowa Women's Archives, University of Iowa, Iowa City, Iowa.

APPENDIX E
STIRLEN PRAYER

Lord's My Prayer,

Living Father We thank thee today for thy goodness
and grace toward us thy children, look out toward
us in mercy and thy love thy grace and strength
bring us up with thee and with the brethren, May
we not neglect to separate ourselves together, for
we need fellowship, from those need us, and we all
need to worship,
Bless those who sit not alone in the house of the Lord
Bless those who are ever true in heart of affection
for the church, and in the love of the Lord,
Bless those who are true in the love of the Lord,
May they be true in the love of the Lord,
and may the witness of their lives be a witness to
the lives they touch and know,
Bless all ministers of the word, all teachers, and
officers of the church, may we not teach merely history or
doctrines but may we hold up Jesus Christ, may
the promise be I if I be lifted up I will draw all men
unto me, receive and see us, through Christ we pray,

Figure E1. Prayer from Stirlen's personal prayer book.
Courtesy of Suzanne Boyde.

APPENDIX F

STIRLEN AND EVELYN BIRKBY



Figure F1. Edythe Stirlen and radio homemaker and columnist Evelyn Birkby.
Courtesy of Evelyn Birkby.

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