

## WHEN FFA WAS KING OF THE RADIO AIRWAVES

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### Abstract

*Many agricultural educators are not aware of the extensive use made by the National FFA broadcasting on the radio as a mass media during the 1930s and early 1940s. This period of time represented one when the most influential mass media in the United States was the radio. From 1931 until 1944 a total of 157 radio broadcasts were made over the NBC Radio Network. The broadcasts carried news of the day concerning the FFA including several state association activities. Various dignitaries such as President Franklin Roosevelt and the Secretary of Agriculture Henry Wallace were either on the programs or were represented on the programs. The period showed significant growth for the National FFA from 60,000 members to 80,000 members and also recorded the FFA's contribution to World War II. The national radio broadcasts spawned several state FFA radio broadcasts and proved to be a marvelous public relations outlet for the organization. The authors conclude with the point that teacher educators need to teach about such activities as the radio broadcasts as a way of completing the total picture of its history.*

### Introduction

Few agricultural educators know the total history of the FFA. As with any large national organization, several people had to work together and many important events had to merge together in order for an end product as successful and important as the FFA to become established and to succeed.

In one sense, the history of the FFA can be compared to a jigsaw puzzle. One piece of the puzzle is the national radio broadcasts, which the organization had on the air for more than a decade. In order for FFA members to know something about that frequently missing piece, advisors will need to know about the broadcasts in order to teach about them. Advisors will need to learn from their teacher educators to be able to teach an accurate history of the FFA. Consequently, agricultural teacher educators need to familiarize themselves with FFA historical points, including the radio broadcasts.

In addition to its importance for teacher educators, many other pieces of the total FFA history can be found in the radio broadcasts. For example membership numbers jumped dramatically during the time period of the broadcasts and the organizations patriotic participation in

World War II can also be told with the history of the radio broadcasts.

### Conceptual Framework

As early as 1925, when the Future Farmers of Virginia was first discussed, the radio was "becoming a necessity to the farmer' in order to keep track of crop prices and markets and to hear 'lectures by experts that kept the farmer informed of the latest methods of agriculture'" (Perdue & Perdue, 1996, p. 19). Two years later, when the Future Farmers of America was founded, the Vocational Dinner Bell radio program was broadcast during the third annual meeting of the National Congress of Vocational Agricultural Students on November 21, 1927 in Kansas City (Program, 1927).

The National Broadcasting Company (NBC) radio network incorporated on September 6, 1926. Its parent company, Radio Corporation of America (RCA), had purchased New York City radio station WEAf from American Telephone and Telegraph for one million dollars (Bergreen, 1980). In addition, NBC owned radio station WJZ, also of New York City. NBC linked two series of radio stations together with WEAf being the flagship station for one and WJZ the flagship station for the other. NBC

was starting the first radio networks. Engineers traced the network associated with WEAJ with a red pencil on a map and the one associated with WJZ with a blue pencil. The pencil colors gave the two networks their names.

The Red network was commercial in nature and sold advertising time, while the Blue network was more philanthropic in nature and emphasized service and education (Bergreen, 1980). The Blue network was closer to what we currently think of as National Public Radio. Logically, the FFA broadcasts occurred on the Blue network.

The national radio broadcasts came at an early point in the history of the National FFA. They proved to be successful with a 14 year run and helped establish the name of the organization all over the country. How all of this was accomplished is an interesting story.

### **Purpose/Objectives**

The purpose of this study was to document the establishment and accomplishments of the FFA radio broadcasts as part of the NBC Radio Network. The specific objectives of the study were to:

1. Identify the beginning point and its circumstances for the FFA national radio broadcasts,
2. Document the accomplishments of the radio broadcasts, and
3. Determine the reasons for the demise of the broadcasts.

### **Methods/Procedures**

Historical research methods were utilized to accomplish the objectives of the study. Both primary and secondary sources were used to obtain information. Primary sources included books, letters, audio tapes, and broadcast transcripts. Secondary sources included books and magazines. Information was collected at numerous sites including the Library of Congress, a major land-grant university library, and the National FFA Center Archives.

## **Results/Findings**

### *Beginning of FFA Radio Broadcasts*

There were early local radio broadcasts that helped tell the story of vocational agriculture and FFA prior to the establishment of monthly broadcasts on NBC. One very early broadcast was made by W. A. Ross, Wyoming state supervisor for agricultural education in 1926. The broadcast which aired on radio station KOA, Denver, on June 23<sup>rd</sup> told the story of the summer job of the vocational agriculture teacher. Ross emphasized the point that teaching agriculture was not just a nine month job, but included summer work when the crops grew (Ross, 1926).

In 1930 radio station KDKA in Pittsburgh broadcast a program called Vo-Ag Period (Program for VO-AG Period, 1930). The program was used to tell of activities and instruction associated with a vocational agriculture department. Points were made about record keeping, field trips, and the instructional program. Occasionally, points would be made about activities going on in the Future Farmers of America Chapter.

On November 17, 1930 the National FFA public speaking contest finals were broadcast on the Columbia Broadcasting System (CBS) radio network. Follow-up letters to CBS executives by agricultural education and FFA officials indicated a great deal of pleasure with the broadcasts (Lane, 1930).

On October 2, 1928 the NBC Blue network launched a new program (National Broadcasting Company, 1936) targeted at farmers and rural residents called the National Farm and Home Hour (Campbell, 1976). The National Farm and Home Hour was a daily hour-long program broadcast Monday through Friday. It highlighted several prominent agriculturalists as featured speakers, including the Secretary of Agriculture. Program time was allotted for 4-H, land-grant colleges, and farm organizations. Special features were aired periodically, such as live broadcasts from the International Livestock Exposition in Chicago.

By 1930, Dr. C. H. Lane, Federal Agent for Agricultural Education and National FFA Advisor, had decided it was time for the FFA to be represented on the National Farm and Home Hour. Dr. Lane approached

executives at NBC including Frank Russell, vice president, and Frank Mullen, director of the Farm and Home Hour with the idea that the FFA should also have air time (Lane, 1936). The NBC executives agreed with Dr. Lane and initially authorized 15 minutes of the hour-long broadcast to the FFA on the second Monday of each month.

#### *First Nationwide Broadcast on NBC*

The first nationwide broadcast occurred on April 13, 1931. The broadcast was well received by listeners and both NBC and FFA officials exchanged complimentary letters (Ross, 1931). W. A. Ross, who had worked with the 1926 radio broadcast in Denver had moved from Wyoming to Washington, became executive secretary of the National FFA, and would play a very prominent role in the legacy of the NBC broadcasts. His letter went on to note that William Stannard, who wrote the "Future Farmer March," would work with and lead the United States Army Band for the radio broadcasts (Ross, 1931). In fact, most broadcasts for future years would originate in War College, Washington.

Early broadcasts emphasized getting the radio audience acquainted with the FFA and its activities. For example, on the broadcast of June 8, 1931, National FFA President, Leslie Fry, reviewed some history of the organization with the following statements:

This organization was founded and sponsored during its early days by Mr. Henry C. Groseclose, of Blacksburg, Virginia. Dr. C. H. Lane and Mr. W. A. Ross, both of Washington, D. C., also played important parts in organizing, managing, and directing of this young, inexperienced organization, to which they have rendered immeasurable service throughout its three years of existence (Fry, 1931, p. 1).

Fry went on to name nine purposes of the organization, describe the program of work format, the emblem, and the colors of gold and national blue. He also stated just three years after the birth of the organization that 36 states and the territory

of Hawaii had formed state associations, that 2,500 chapters had been formed, and the organization had 60,000 members (Fry, 1931).

#### *Broadcast Time Expanded*

By 1932 the FFA portion of the National Farm and Home Hour went from a 15 minute segment to the entire one-hour program.

An example of the expanded format can be found on the 15<sup>th</sup> broadcast, which aired June 13, 1932. The program was on the air from 12:30 to 1:30 PM Eastern Standard Time. The program opened from War College in Washington, DC for 2½ minutes with its signature opening of "The National FFA March" as played by the United States Army Band (Manuscript, 1932).

The opening statement from the Washington announcer was (Manuscript, 1932):

Good afternoon friends!

Welcome with the strains of this stirring F. F. A. march to the Fifteenth Future Farmers of America Program of the National Farm and Home Hour. These programs are brought to you every second Monday of the month at this time through the cooperation of the Future Farmers of America national organization of farm boys studying vocational agriculture in 46 states, Hawaii and Porto (sic) Rico, and the National Broadcasting Company. (p. 1)

Speakers for this broadcast included E. T. Franks, member of the Federal Board for Vocational Education representing manufacturing and commerce, who spoke on the topic of "The Relation of Manufacturing and Commerce to Agriculture" and Harry Sanders, professor of agricultural education at Virginia Polytechnic Institute, who spoke on the topic "Training Local Advisors of F. F. A. in Porto (sic) Rico." W. A. Ross spent seven minutes presenting the Bulletin Board, a regular feature on the broadcasts. For the Bulletin Board, Ross described highlights of FFA activities from the states of Nebraska, Tennessee, South Dakota, Texas, Georgia, Oregon, and California (Manuscript, 1932).

For the June 13, 1932 broadcast, only the Washington studio was used. On many

broadcasts, other studios such as Chicago and New York would be used in addition to Washington. The United States Army Band played a prominent role in most broadcasts. On the June 13<sup>th</sup> broadcast it had a total of 25 minutes of air time including a close with the Star Spangled Banner (Manuscript, 1932).

#### *Fifth Anniversary Broadcast*

The fifth anniversary show aired on April 13, 1936. The 61<sup>st</sup> program followed the same general format as had the other hour-long broadcasts. With a theme of "Radio as a Rural Institution" various leaders of both the FFA and NBC had prominent roles in the program.

W. A. Ross read the FFA Bulletin Board for five minutes and had news from 16 states. C. H. Lane had a five minute statement reviewing the history of the FFA broadcasts on the National Farm and Home Hour. "I shall never forget the day I walked into Mr. Frank Russell's office, Vice President of the National Broadcasting Company here in Washington, and told him without any formalities that I had an unusually good suggestion for him from the standpoint of a National radio broadcasting program over the broadcasting stations on the Farm and Home Hour" (Manuscript, 1936). Frank Mullen, Director of Information for NBC's parent company, Radio Corporation of America, presented a five-minute speech from the New York studio supporting the FFA and agriculture in general. He combined both with his closing statement of "I hope that young rural American will really take hold of the present day challenge to build an agriculture founded securely on its own feet and working with the rest of the nation to build a happy and prosperous America" (Manuscript, 1936).

The fifth anniversary broadcast also included a skit led by National FFA President William Shaffer. During the skit it was noted that National FFA membership had climbed to 100,000. After the six officers reviewed how radio had influenced them and their communities, President Shaffer closed the skit with the last paragraph of the FFA Creed "I believe that rural America can and will hold true to the

best traditions in our national life and that I can exert an influence in my home and community which will stand solid for my part in that inspiring task" (Manuscript, 1936).

For the special anniversary show, greetings were received from former national officers and read over the air by President Shaffer. W. A. Ross read greetings from such luminaries as President Roosevelt; Secretary of Agriculture, Henry Wallace; Commissioner of Education, J. W. Studebaker; President of the American Farm Bureau Federation, Edward O'Neal; and President of the American Royal Livestock Show, E. H. Sverson (Manuscript, 1936). The last celebrity speaker was W. A. Drips, Agricultural Director for NBC, who spoke from the Chicago studio.

#### *Happy Family Skit*

The skit portrayed by the national officers during the broadcast of April 13, 1936 may have laid the groundwork for the Happy Family. The Happy Family was composed of a farm family with a mother, father, daughter, and two sons who were members of the local FFA chapter. The two sons were named Joe and Jack. The part of Jack was played by Bill Shaffer. The part of the dad was played by J. A. Linke. (The Cast, 1938)

The skits, written by W. A. Ross, were on the air for 18 months and would typically have the characters discuss activities of the local FFA chapter. For example, on December 13, 1937 the boys talked about the home improvement work they had completed and only at the end of the 10 page skit found out they had won national recognition. (Manuscript, December 13, 1937)

#### *Radio Broadcasts in the 1940s*

At the beginning of the 1940's decade, the national radio broadcasts were enjoying great success. In 1940, the National Farm and Home Hour made special broadcasts on November 11, 12, and 13 from the National FFA Convention in Kansas City. Some 80,000 people in FFA members' homes listened to one or more broadcasts. At the same time, 4,000 of the 7,000 FFA Chapters had another 80,000 members listening to the same series of broadcasts (Ross, 1940). The national radio broadcasts generated enough interest that 1,800 local chapters presented

one or more radio broadcasts during 1940. Thirty-four state associations also had state-wide broadcasts during the year.

During this decade radio was truly a mass media giant in the United States. Thirty-one million homes had radio sets, with over 59 million sets in use. There were more radios than gas or electric stoves, telephones, or even bathtubs (How to Buy, 1943).

Radio broadcasts had become so popular for the FFA during this decade that a section of the national organization's manual was devoted to such activity making points on the importance of radio and also giving hints to advisors on how to make successful local broadcasts (Future Farmers of America Manual, 1940). The 1940 FFA Manual stated: "The radio is exceedingly important as a means of informing the public concerning F. F. A. ideals, principles and activities. It is also a valuable aid in discovering talent of various kinds, providing leadership training, and giving experience to many members of the organization" (p. 74).

The influence of World War II was felt by the entire nation as well as FFA members. The FFA radio broadcast scheduled for December 8, 1941 was cancelled, as that was the day after Pearl Harbor was attacked and the day President Roosevelt addressed Congress asking for a declaration of war.

The 137<sup>th</sup> broadcast on October 12, 1942 gave insight into the influence the War was having on the national FFA organization. The broadcast was 30 minutes long, airing from 12:30 to 1:00 E. W. T. (Eastern War Time). W. T. Spanton, Chief of the Agricultural Education Service of the U. S. Office of Education, reminisced about the 1941 national convention that had 8,000 attendees from 47 states and Hawaii and Puerto Rico. He noted that many of those convention attendees were now in the armed services. He also reported that two former FFA members had accompanied Jimmy Doolittle in the bombing expedition over Tokyo. For the current year, Spanton was asking that no more than 200 attend the national convention. His request over the air for the October 26-29 convention was:

1. Attendance at the convention is limited to two official delegates, plus national officers, if any, and one adult from each state. In addition, each State may send one or two American Farmer candidates who, in the opinion of the State supervisor, would make good material from which next year's national officers will be selected.
2. Travel to and from Kansas City, regardless of distances, is to be made by public carriers; viz, train or bus, in order to conserve rubber.
3. "Future Farmers" everywhere realize that the first and most important job confronting every man, woman, and child in the United States is that of contributing maximum effort to the winning of the war. Therefore, the convention proper will not exceed three days in length and will be devoted entirely to the transaction of necessary business, election of officers, and the setting up of a national program of work which will contribute most to the war effort. (Manuscript, 1942, p. 4)

Other portions of the October 12<sup>th</sup> broadcast were similar to the format already established. W. A. Ross read news from the bulletin board, now called F. F. A. Flashes. Much of the state associations' news also centered around the War effort. The Wisconsin FFA was conducting a scrap metal and rubber drive, Louisiana FFA was conducting a Food for Victory program, Kentucky FFA reported 2,210 active and associate members in the armed forces, and Delaware FFA was conducting a scrap metal drive and offering war bonds as prizes for the chapters collecting the most. Ross also reported that in the past year F. F. A. members had "purchased \$1,586,000 worth of war bonds and stamps; collected 77,018,762 pounds of scrap metal; 30,606,875 pounds of paper; 2,767,821 pounds of rubber; 605,949 pounds of rags; and have 49,408 active and associate members now serving in the armed forces" (Manuscript, 1942, p. 2).

### *Demise of the FFA Radio Broadcast*

In 1944 NBC executives decided to significantly change the airtime for the National Farm and Home Hour to one program per week. As a result of this decision, the FFA was limited to one four-minute broadcast which was aired on the second Saturday of each month. The new format only left time for FFA Flashes presented by A. W. Tenney. After 157 successful broadcasts, the FFA national radio broadcasts had become a mere shadow of what they had once been. The last radio committee report at the national convention was made in 1944 (Proceedings, 1944).

### *Public Communications After Radio Broadcasts*

By 1949, the responsibility for FFA-related public communication fell largely on state associations, who were encouraged to assist chapters in establishing and carrying out radio programs (Proceedings, 1949, p. 41). The public relations committee at the 1949 national convention suggested that outlets for such public relations efforts extend much broader than radio—including newspapers, magazines, window displays, films, and FFA calendars. In the 1950s, the above list was amended to include the institution of regular local and state newsletters, a national brochure called "Future Farmers of America in Action," state public relations tours (similar to goodwill tours performed by national officers), school assembly programs, outstanding members speaking to civic groups and farm organizations, a national student exchange program, and magazines being supplied to high school, college and public libraries, as well as airlines and railroad companies (Proceedings, 1953).

The publication *FFA at 25* was prepared as a result of a proposal by delegates at the 24th national convention in 1951 to increase FFA knowledge and awareness. The focus of 1960's publicity included attempts to secure a national television special and *Children's Barnyard* educational materials to be distributed at county fairs, with the basic premise that "public relations is doing good and telling about it" (Proceedings, 1968, p. 43).

### **Conclusions/Recommendations/ Implications**

A great deal of the history of the National FFA for the 1930s and the first half of the 1940s was told with the radio broadcasts. Starting in 1931 the number of FFA chapters went from 2,500 and the number of members went from 60,000 to 7,000 chapters and 80,000 members in 1940. All of these facts were proudly reported on the broadcasts. The solemnness and seriousness of World War II, along with FFA members' participation and sacrifices for it, were also broadcast. As the youthful three-year old organization matured to an adolescent of 16 years, the radio broadcasts matured in a similar fashion, adding numerous programmatic aspects and nationally recognized speakers.

Many agricultural education students and FFA advisors who learn or emphasize FFA history but have never heard of the FFA radio programs are missing something. These programs provided evidence of the goals, projects, accomplishments and membership characteristics of the organization. They also relate agricultural education and FFA to a larger context—putting it into the 'bigger picture' of significant historical events, cultural traditions, and national trends. This paper provides some of the missing information to complement the current body of information taught to FFA members in middle schools, high schools, and colleges as FFA history.

Furthermore, agricultural educators (including teachers and extension agents) need to learn from this past example, and use all available media to communicate the positive aspects of agriculture. Decades ago, radio was a public relations mainstay. Today, televisions, computers, electronic web pages, and other contemporary means of communication should be used to promote agricultural education and FFA. A recent announcement from the National FFA Headquarters in Indianapolis described a rural television program sponsored by DISH network began broadcasting on December 15, 2000 at no charge to agricultural educators. The daily broadcasts will provide a diverse range of informational programs targeted at rural educational institutions, farmers, ranchers, rural organizations, and home audiences. This could be a modern

version of the radio programs of the 1930s and early '40s. Perhaps this will be the positive P.R. our industry and organization desperately need to garner the confidence and support of the general public, who often hears only of agricultural disasters—bankruptcy, animal abuse at county fairs, suicide, and tobacco company litigation. Agricultural educators at all levels should effectively use—and teach their students to use—modern forms of media to promote FFA, as was done on the early FFA radio programs.

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