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Susan Opt
James Madison University
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THE DEVELOPMENT OF RURAL WIRED RADIO SYSTEMS IN UPSTATE SOUTH CAROLINA

Susan K. Opt

In the 1930s, the residents of upstate South Carolina constructed a homemade media system—wired radio—which lasted in some areas for almost 10 years. Wires were strung across miles of countryside to connect thousands of nonelectrified rural houses to a central receiver located at the end of the power line so that residents could partake in the radio revolution being experienced in other parts of the nation. This essay describes the development and construction of these wired radio systems and looks at local programming and resident reactions to the medium. Information for this essay comes from interviews with and the writings of system operators and subscribers. Initial research indicates that such homemade media systems were unique to that area of the country and that they served different purposes and needs than the wired radio systems that developed in the large cities during the 1930s. Also, previous scholarly work on this topic has maintained that such systems in the United States died out after experimentation in the 1920s, contrary to the findings covered in this paper.

Traveling down the dirt and gravel backroads of upstate South Carolina in the 1930s, one might have observed iron or copper wires dangling across treetops, attached to fenceposts and cedar posts, and occasionally to telephones poles. These wires carried neither electricity nor telephone conversations to their end destinations, but rather served to connect nonelectrified rural communities to the radio airwaves passing overhead.

What follows is a preliminary description of the wired radio systems that developed to meet the needs of several rural South Carolinean communities and the responses of those who remember such systems. The data about these systems were drawn from interviews with and the writings of system operators and subscribers. The intent is to paint a picture of a little researched media system that exists now only in the memories of an older generation.

To be considered first, however, is previous research on the topic and the operation of wired radio systems in the United States in general. Then, the development of wired radio systems in the northwest area of South Carolina along with descriptions of programming and local reaction to the systems will be presented.

Wired Radio Systems in the United States

Scholarly attention to wired radio or wired relay systems has focused on the use of telephone wires to transmit music, cultural events, and other information to a subscriber audience. (See, for example, Woods, 1967, and Sivowitch, 1970.) These articles research technological developments from 1876 to 1920 and argue that such wired telephone transmissions

Susan K. Opt (Ph.D., Ohio State University, 1987) is currently Lecturer in Communication and Journalism for the University of Maryland European Campus in Munich, Germany. Her area of research interest is rhetoric and social intervention.

were early forms of broadcasting and influenced the later development of over-the-air broadcasting. In addition, much attention has been given to systems that developed outside of the United States because such systems were believed to have been unsuccessful in the United States. Welke (1979), writing about British relay exchanges that developed in the 1920s and 1930s, notes:

> The perceived advantages of a wired broadcasting service or a wired broadcast relay service were apparently limited for the American public and these ideas faded from the scene not to be reborn again until the advent of CATV in the late 1940s.

However, by focusing on the development of wired relay systems from telephone technology prior to 1930, scholars have ignored the later wired radio systems that did grow out of over-the-air broadcasting in the United States.

For example, in 1930, *The New York Times* reported that the New York Waldorf-Astoria Hotel would be installing loudspeakers in each of its 2,000 rooms. A master antenna on top of the hotel would pick up radio signals and then relay them over wire to the hotel rooms. The system would deliver six radio channels. Other hotels in New York had similar systems ("New Waldorf," 1930). One South Carolinean wired radio system operator, Gordon Rogers, said that in 1939, he stayed at the Lexington Hotel in New York, which had such a system. In fact, Rogers' system used the same loudspeakers that the hotels used (personal communication, Jan. 6, 1985).

In 1931, *The New York Times* reported that laboratory researchers in Ampere, New Jersey, had invented a new type of radio equipment that made it possible to broadcast simultaneously three separate programs over ordinary power lines. The article predicted that this new wired system would eliminate advertising from radio and free it from static and fading ("Conceptual Universe," 1931).

In 1932, *Popular Science* reported on a wired radio service operated by the central telephone office in Lorain, Ohio. The company laid cables, separate from the telephone wires, over which entertainment could be broadcast. The service operated from 6:30 a.m. until 1 a.m., 23 days a month, and could serve up to 700 subscribers. Operators selected the entertainment, although subscribers could call the office with requests. The article noted, "The all-day-long entertainment has proved popular with those who do not want to be bothered with a complete radio receiver, or dislike paying for one" (Martin, 1932, p. 19).

In 1935, *The New York Times* reported that the wired radio system developed by Ampere Laboratories was operating in Cleveland, Ohio. The article said, "Programs from a central studio in Cleveland are being sent on a commercial basis over electric light wires to a 'few subscribers' in the Lakewood section of the city...." ("Wired Radio System," 1935, p. 11). The system was operated by Wired Radio, Inc., a subsidiary of the North American Company of New York, which had "been experimenting with this type of dissemination for years" ("Wired Radio System" 1935, p. 11). North American had just formed a new subsidiary—Muzak. Subscribers paid $1.50 a month for recordings programming. The system had no advertising and announcements were kept to a "minimum." To receive programming, one rented a "wired radio set" and plugged it into a light socket ("Wired Radio System," 1935, p. 11).

In 1936, *Literary Digest* commented on Cleveland's wired radio system. For 18 hours a day, subscribers could receive three types of music—jazz, Victor Herbert type music,

and semiclassical—commercial-free. Speakers rented for either $2 or $4.50 a month. The article concluded, "You might far too soon sicken of unadulterated music. That's why it won't compete with radio under its present set-up" ("Wired Radio on Tap," 1936, p. 37).

Also in 1936, Muzak and the Wired Radio Corporation started business in New York with a system operated over leased telephone wires, aimed at New York businesses such as hotels and restaurants. The article reported that Muzak Corporation controlled a musical catalog of 600,000 to 700,000 selections. But, high fidelity recordings would also be circulated among subscribers who might want to play their own selections on a phonograph attached to their line. ("Cafes Here," 1936). A week later, *The New York Times* reported that 40 hotels and restaurants had subscribed to the wired radio system ("40 Cafes," 1936).

So, as can been seen, wired radio systems did not disappear after attempts in the United States to transmit over telephone wires in the 1920s (Welke, 1979). Rather, the systems, transmitting over telephone, power and, sometimes, separate cable lines, reappeared in the 1930s after over-the-air broadcasting became popular. During this same time period, the wired radio systems in upstate South Carolina emerged. However, as will be seen, the rural systems served different purposes than those just described. The citified versions were developed in laboratories or by companies and operated commercially for a profit. This was also the case with the earlier overseas wired relay systems that broadcast over telephone lines. Also, the government usually played a role in the licensing and operation of these telephone systems. The primary purpose of the American city systems seems to have been to provide commercial-free or static-free entertainment. This was also true with the overseas wired radio systems. Welke (1979) writes, "These systems offered good reception, distant foreign stations..., low cost, and easy-to-operate equipment."

In addition, the above-described American systems served city markets in which electricity and radio had been available for years. Hence, the city systems provided listeners an alternative whereas the South Carolinean systems provided the community with the means to listen to radio.

Development of Wired Radio Systems in South Carolina

Persons living in rural upstate South Carolinean communities in the 1930s were still fairly isolated from other parts of the world despite the development of technologies such as the telegraph, telephone, and radio. The telegraph had never intruded much into these areas. Its lines served only the cities, and Western Union did not deliver outside city limits, preferring to mail rural residents their telegrams.

Telephone service, like the telegraph, primarily served the cities, with only a few lines running down the main rural roads. In the 1930s, places such as Hickory Tavern had no telephones while Saylors Crossroads boasted of four.

The rural residents also lacked another convenience their city cousins had—electricity. Utility expansion into the rural areas had halted during the depression because of the high cost of erecting power lines to serve isolated customers (Walker, 1940). When the South Carolina Rural Electrification Authority was established in 1935, less than 5% of South Carolinean farms were electrified ("Rural Electrification," 1936).

Because of the lack of electricity in the 1930s, rural residents wanting to tune into the still-recent technology of radio had to rely on battery-operated receivers. But the cost

of owning and maintaining a battery-operated radio was beyond that of many S.C. farmers. A 1926 Sears-Roebuck Agricultural Foundation survey showed that only 3% of the farm homes in the Eastern Cotton States had radios. In comparison, 38% of the farm homes in the Northeast and 33% in the Midwest had radios ("What the Farmer Listens To," 1926). Robert Wasson, a wired radio system operator, wrote about the experiences of and lack of broadcast entertainment for the typical South Carolina rural resident in the 1930s:

> The depth of the depression had been reached in the early 1930s. Cotton was selling for 5 cents per pound, eggs were 12 cents a dozen, and sugar was 5 pounds for 19 cents.... Manual labor rate of wages was 50 cents per ten hour day. During these days, entertainment was not available for the average man (1982, p. 627).

Such conditions, then—lack of electricity and expensive battery radio sets—created a niche for the development of wired radio systems in South Carolina.

Gordon Rogers, a wired radio system founder in Mauldin, said in the winter of 1930-1931, he built an alternating current receiver using junk radio parts and a speaker from an old battery set. Then it occurred to him that from his receiver he might be able to provide radio to a neighbor who had no electric service. By installing a single wire with ground return, he connected a loudspeaker at his neighbor's house to his receiver. Rogers' experiment worked and within several months, he extended service to seven families. "In about four years, 600 homes were being served" (Rogers, 1980, p. 69).

Wasson told a similar story. "At Hickory Tavern, the Duke Power Company's line ended one mile south of the school at Wasson Brothers' Store. The people in the area did not have electricity; therefore they did not have radios" (1982, p. 627). The Wasson brothers purchased a large receiver and ran lines to houses in which loudspeakers had been installed. Eventually, nearly 500 homes subscribed to the Wassons' "grapevine system" (Wasson, 1982).

Similar events occurred in other South Carolinean communities. Wherever the power line stopped, a small rebroadcasting station was established with lines running to the nonelectrified neighboring areas. These systems first appeared in the early 1930s and remained in operation until the Rural Electrification Authority Cooperatives brought electricity to the areas and residents could afford electric radios.

The Systems

According to Rogers, 10 to 12 of these wired radio systems existed in upstate South Carolina (personal communication, Dec. 1, 1984). However, only five systems, located in the towns of Mauldin, Ware Place, Saylors Crossroads, Williamston, and Hickory Tavern, are discussed here. Other systems apparently operated in another area near Mauldin, in Walhalla, and in South Carolina across the Savannah River from Augusta, Georgia. The starting point for two of the systems seems to have been in Mauldin where Rogers was inspired to connect his neighbor's loudspeaker to his receiver.

Mauldin

In 1930, the Rogers family was one of 25 families to purchase electric stoves or refrigerators so that the power company would extend its lines to Mauldin, on Route 276 southeast of

Greenville, South Carolina. The Rogers' house was on the end of the power line.

> Martha Kellett, Rogers' sister, recalled:
>
> Electric power also helped Gordon in his experimenting with radio. He repaired radios some but the batteries didn't last long so he decided to do what some hotels were doing and add speakers to his own radio now that we had electricity; so he ran a wire down the hill to the Walter Fowler's home and attached a speaker. (*Mauldin's Legacy*, 1984, p. 197)

The first wire Rogers ran as part of his wired radio system came from a Model T ignition coil. He strung it across trees and a fence to reach his neighbors. Broken ends off of 5-cent size Coke bottles served as insulators. When the family beyond the first connection wanted on the system, Rogers used iron wire and stapled it to telephone poles. However, when it rained, the radio transmitted over the telephone lines. The president of the telephone party line came out and cut Rogers' line to shreds (Rogers, personal communication, Dec. 1, 1984).

His earliest subscribers received the wired radio service free. Later subscribers paid 10 cents a month to cover Rogers' increased electric bill. All subscribers installed their own lines and purchased and connected their own speakers.

In 1933, when Rogers began his freshman year at Clemson University, the line was about five miles long and served 15 customers. Then he ran across some "bargain" speakers. Rogers noted, "The appearance of magnetic cone speakers selling at $2.85 gave a sudden impetus to the growth of the system. Within four months, the number of subscribers increased to more than 200..." ("50 Years of Progress," 1981, p. 20). By June 1934, the line reached 15 miles.

"When the line extended to about 10 miles, the volume at the far end became so low as to be quite unsatisfactory, because of excessive losses in the iron wire," Rogers recalled (1980, p. 71). To resolve the problem, he called a meeting of all subscribers who lived five miles and beyond. Each subscriber contributed $1 to replace the iron wire with copper wire. In one day, the community installed five miles of posts and copper wires along with telephone-type insulators. After that, all new subscribers paid a $1 fee toward replacing the iron with copper wire. Eventually, his system consisted of 400 miles of single-wire transmission lines that extended over three counties, in a 23-mile radius. About 85 percent of the families within that radius subscribed to the system (Rogers, 1980, p.69, 73).

Rogers also developed a system by which he could call the subscribers via the line. "When the system was in its infancy and only the immediate neighbors were connected, it was desirable to be able to talk to them from time to time," he explained (1980, p. 71). So he designed a switching system that allowed the speakers to act as microphones. He also devised a "calling system" so that subscribers could push a button at the speaker to alert Rogers that they wanted to talk to him. But, Rogers noted:

> [A]s the number of speakers increased it became more difficult to hear the voice signal. Also, the hum resulting from grounds in the power system was strong enough to drown out the signal. In addition, the number of subscribers had increased to the point where it was not desirable to interrupt the program to speak to a person on the line. (1980, p. 71)

Rogers also developed a "wired wireless system" to connect his system to the one operated in Ware Place. He rebroadcast some school programs originating on the Ware Place system. "The combined systems could reach over 3,000 listeners," he noted (1980, p. 73).

After Rogers was graduated from Clemson University in 1937, the Rural Electrification Authority extended power lines to the rural areas around Mauldin. Thus, the wired radio system in Mauldin discontinued around 1939 (Rogers, personal communication, Jan. 6, 1985).

Ware Place

In the 1930s, J.R. Chandler ran a small store in Ware Place, on Route 25 east of Anderson, South Carolina. He heard about Rogers' wired radio system in Mauldin. "We went over and talked to the boys and they built the system for us," Chandler said (personal communication, Sept. 23, 1984). He did not recall exactly when he started his system although it was in place by 1934. He operated it until after World War II. "We wouldn't cut it during the war because people had sons in service," he explained, and for some, it was the only way to get information about the war (personal communication, Sept. 23, 1984).

Like the Mauldin system, subscribers built and maintained their own lines, using galvanized wire connected to cedar or oak posts. James Albert Smith, whose family subscribed to Chandler's system, recalled, "Sometimes you had to trim the bushes off the line to get reception" (personal communication, Aug. 27, 1984).

Customers had the choice of two speakers—one $7 to $8 and a smaller one costing $3 to $5. Subscribers initially paid 25 cents a month and later 35 cents for the service. "We never made any money off of it," Chandler added (personal communication, Sept. 23, 1984).

The system aired from 6 or 7 a.m. until 9 or 10 p.m. On Saturday, the system operated until midnight or 1 a.m. After the system shut down at night, subscribers could shout into the loudspeakers and hear each other. Smith remembered, "People would take turns talking. That was the way to find out the neighborhood news" (personal communication, Aug. 27, 1984).

Smith continued, "The system was very popular. It didn't really cost that much. You could sell three dozen eggs to pay for it" (personal communication, Aug. 27, 1984). He remembered Chandler saying that the system had over 500 customers at one time. Chandler said his system declined because of wire maintenance cost. "If we had wanted to go to the expense of putting in good lines and getting a good radio, it would probably still be here today," he remarked. "But it was time to change" (personal communication, Sept. 23, 1984).

Saylors Crossroads

In 1937, Duke Power came to Saylors Crossroads, near Route 76 southeast of Anderson, South Carolina, and ran power lines down the main roads. "We started the system for those off the roads that didn't get electricity," said Harry Murdock, son of system founder Charles Murdock, who had run a general store in Saylors Crossroads since 1928. "It was like an intercom. We ran one line to the house and every line was grounded at the house. We had 500 subscribers at the top," Murdock continued (personal communication, Aug. 27, 1984). Local folk called it the "speakerline" or "party line."

Murdock said his family got into the wired radio business to make money. He

believed the idea for the system came from the one at Ware Place. Subscribers paid 45 cents a month and had a choice of three speaker sizes: a square-shaped speaker for $7.50, a larger square-shaped speaker for $9.50, and a heart-shaped speaker for $12.50. "The profit made on the speaker about covered the cost of putting the line to the house," Murdock said (personal communication, Aug. 27, 1984). The Murdocks installed galvanized lines along the roads where most of the houses were located. "If a person lived off the track from where we ran our lines, they could join the system by putting up their own poles. Then we would run the wires. It was too costly for us to get the ones that lived way off," Murdock recalled (personal communication, Aug. 27, 1984).

Murdock drove the truck that carried the cedar posts. "We used cedar posts that were 20 feet high. We had to have 16 feet of clearance to clear for the mules," he noted. His father also farmed and used his farm help to install the system. "When we started building the line, we would go down the road and see who wanted to subscribe. We did no advertising for it," Murdock continued (personal communication, Aug. 27, 1984).

The system's studio was located in a small building behind his father's general store. His mother's twin sister, Selma Saylors, ran the radio during the daytime. It operated from 6 a.m. until 11 p.m., except on Saturday when hours were extended until midnight or 1 a.m. The receiver was usually tuned to Anderson's radio station (WAIM) until it signed off at 9 p.m., and then a station from Cincinnati was tuned. "We had a switch on the system that was tied to an alarm clock so it would automatically shut off the system at night so no one had to sit up until 11 o'clock to turn it off," Murdock recalled (personal communication, Aug. 27, 1984).

From 1938 until 1940, Mount Bethel Baptist Church was connected to the wired radio system and services were rebroadcast Sunday mornings. "Church services were popular because not everyone had a car. It was easier to listen than to drive a wagon to church," Murdock explained (personal communication, Aug. 27, 1984). On Saturday nights local residents would gather around the studio to listen to "Grand Ole Opry" broadcasts.

Like today's modern cable television services, the Murdocks had problems with bootleggers. "When they were illegally tied in, if they weren't insulated, they would draw current off the wire so subscribers further down would not receive the broadcast. So we could track down the bootleggers," Murdock said. Usually, when caught, bootleggers subscribed. Sometimes youth used tin cans and hay baling wire to tap into the lines, causing interference (personal communication, Aug. 27, 1984).

The wired radio system operated from 1937 until 1941. "The system started declining in 1939 when Duke Power started expanding," Murdock said (personal communication, Aug. 27, 1984). By World War II, most houses had electricity, residents purchased their own radios, and the speakerline shut down.

Williamston

Like Charles Murdock, Carl Ellison ran a general store located at the end of the power line in Williamston, between Belton and Greenville, South Carolina. He started a wired radio system sometime in the 1930s and Carl Grayson Ellison, son of system founder Carl Ellison, said he believed it was still operating in 1940 (personal communication, Aug. 27, 1984).

Ellison thought his father got the idea for the system after hearing about the one in Ware Place. Ellison's widow recalled that her husband "went to Greenville to see a man there about the speakerline system. He was put in contact with another man who built the system" (personal communication, Aug. 26, 1984).

The Ellisons, who lived behind their store, converted their living room into a studio to use for local broadcasting. The radio, on the air from 6 a.m. until midnight, was operated by Ellison and his mother during the day. Ellison used to do a disc jockey-type show for 30 or 40 minutes in the afternoon, he recalled (personal communication, Aug. 27, 1984).

Subscribers paid 50 cents a month for the service and bought one of two sizes of speakers. At one point, 700 houses were connected, Ellison recalled; often he had to collect the fees. Two men were also hired to help install and maintain the wires and to collect fees. The system was advertised by word-of-mouth, although some door-to-door soliciting occurred when they ran the lines (Ellison, personal communication, Aug. 27, 1984).

Unlike the other systems described here, no standard posts were used. They attached copper telephone wire to trees, fenceposts, and any kind of structure that could be used to reach the houses. "The voltage was so low that you could string the wires to anything," Ellison explained (personal communication, Aug. 27, 1984). Like the Chandler system, the wires carried reverse current so when the system was shut down, subscribers could shout at each other through the loudspeakers. "You couldn't call anyone in particular. Anyone who was listening could hear the conversation," a system subscriber, Rolland Drake, remembered (personal communication, Aug. 26, 1984).

On Friday nights, preachers came from Greenville to preach over the system. On Sundays, the First Baptist Church in Williamston tied into the system to broadcast. "The reason the preachers liked the system is that some churches only had preaching twice a month because preachers had to alternate between churches," Mrs. Ellison explained (personal communication, Aug. 26, 1984). On Saturday nights, a crowd would gather in the Ellisons' yard to listen directly to the "Grand Ole Opry." Ellison noted, "It was supposed to be a fellowship-type thing, but there was more listening than fellowship occurred" (personal communication, Aug. 27, 1984).

The system operated for seven or eight years, Mrs. Ellison said. Then electricity came through. Also the lines had begun to deteriorate. She continued, "We were having a lot of trouble keeping the lines maintained. They were hard to keep up" (personal communication, Aug. 26, 1984). So this wired radio system, too, gave way to electric radio.

Hickory Tavern

In the 1930s, the Wasson brothers, Robert and James, ran a store located at the end of the power line to Hickory Tavern, on Route 76 west of Laurens, South Carolina. An employee at Payne's Music Company in Greenville gave them the idea to start a wired radio system. In March 1936, the brothers purchased the equipment to start up a system and opened a studio in the Wasson homeplace (Wasson, 1982, p. 627).

They attached wires to cedar posts provided by subscribers and sold speakers—$6.50 for a small one, $10.50 for a large one. The speaker's price covered installation costs. "One hundred thirteen homes were connected as soon as the lines could be erected," Robert Wasson said (1982, p. 627). By the year's end, 300 houses were connected, and at its peak, 500 houses in about a 12-mile radius subscribed. Subscribers paid 25 cents a month. The system broadcast from 6 or 7 a.m. until after the evening news. The Wassons' mother, Effie, operated the system and Robert did announcements and local news (Wasson, 1982, p. 627).

Five years after the system's beginning, electricity came to the area and the "grapevine" radio system, as the locals called it, ceased to exist. "However, to many it gave much news and entertainment," Wasson remarked (1982, p. 627).

Programming and Local Reaction

According to a 1926 National Farm Radio Council survey, the farmer was more eager to be entertained than taught by radio ("What the Farmer Listens To," 1926, p. 316). This seems to have been true of the wired radio listeners. Rogers noted, "[A] large percentage of the programs was anything but cultural in type.... [P]ractically all new customers asked for 'Hill-Billy' or 'Fiddlin' programs and music" (1980, p. 73). Although the wired radio system operators had complete control over the kinds of programs that were broadcast, most tried to be responsive to their subscribers' desires. Chandler recalled broadcasting political programs, such as Franklin Roosevelt's election speech. But country music and church programs were the most popular, he said (personal communication, Sept. 23, 1984). Louis Ellis, a subscriber to the Saylors Crossroads system, remembered listening to country and bluegrass music and some gospel music on the system (personal communication, Dec. 12, 1984). On Saturday nights, the "Grand Ole Opry" was a big hit on all the systems.

Also popular with listeners was local programming. "People seemed to enjoy listening to people that they knew," Murdock explained. On his system, as with others, listeners could write in to request that certain songs be played. For example, Saylors Crossroads system subscribers could request special birthday tunes to be played at a certain time in the day. "If there was a death in the community, we would interrupt programming and announce it. Otherwise, we had certain times during the day to make announcements," Murdock said. He remembered one man dropping by the studio to announce that he had lost a mule. "The man was not that concerned about the mule but he said that the bank was because it had a mortgage on it" (personal communication, Aug. 27, 1984).

Local bands and singing groups were popular attractions. Several studios had pianos or organs so local folk could come by and express their talents. Rogers noted that during the summer months static was so bad even at night that it was difficult to receive radio. So he initiated a local talent program one night a week (1980, p. 71). Wasson recalled that "a standard program every Sunday afternoon was the Wasson Brothers' Quartet" (1982, p. 627). Ellis was part of a band that broadcast over the Saylors Crossroads system.

Two of the systems—Hickory Tavern and Williamston—carried paid advertising. Wasson announced the advertisements as well as the local evening news. The local drugstore ran weekly ads on the Wasson system for three years. "We had some local advertising," Ellison said. "Usually people just wrote down what they wanted and it was read. Sometimes they'd do their own. Sometimes they'd bring in singers and sponsor a program" (personal communication, Aug. 27, 1984).

The wired radio systems had their influences, though. Rogers, who earlier noted the requests for "low cultural" kinds of programming, said, "After several years of reception, however, they wanted better programs, were more conversant on a greater variety of subjects, and took more interest in outside events" (1980, p. 73). For example, one family who initially wanted hillbilly and fiddlin' music would tune into the Marine Corps band in the afternoons and listen to the news, he said (personal communication, Jan. 6, 1985). "The speakerline system meant more to us then than what a TV does now," Drake remarked. "We'd get our chores done early so we could stay at home in the evenings and listen to it" (personal communication, Aug. 26, 1984).

"Most of the people considered the system a help to the community," Murdock noted (personal communication, Aug. 27, 1984). However, a few persons, such as Harris

Lowe, who lived about two miles from the Murdocks' general store, said he did not care anything about the system and did not subscribe. He recalled that every time he visited the store, the Murdock sisters would be asking for news. "They wanted to know what had happened—deaths and sickness. I wasn't at all interested in it." Lowe also did not think the radio was worth the cost. "People would scrap and sell eggs just to pay that fee" (personal communication, Dec. 12, 1984). But for others, "although it might seem that there would be dissatisfaction with the program fare, most listeners were well pleased and would not part with their 'radio,'" Rogers said (1980, p. 73).

Summary

In 1936, *The New York Times* reported that a broader market for radios was being made available by the Rural Electrification Authority. In 1935, 174 percent more farms were electrified than in 1934 and an increase was expected in 1936. The article noted, "The usual trend is for the increased radio set sale on farms to follow closely on the heels of electrification. This was the case in 1935 when the old battery-operated radios were replaced by all-electric receivers" ("Farm Electrification," 1936, p. 15).

As the power lines crept into upstate South Carolina in the late 1930s and early 1940s, the communities followed the national trend and abandoned their one-channel wired radio systems in favor of the affordable selection offered on an electric radio. The niche created by the lack of electricity and the high cost of battery radio sets disappeared. All that remains these days of the five systems described is a small abandoned building that once housed the Saylors Crossroads system studio. Inside, a few remaining microphone stands collect cobwebs.

Although other research indicates that broadcasting over telephone wire before the days of radio never caught on in the United States as it did overseas, wired radio systems did develop after the introduction of over-the-air broadcasting. Furthermore, these systems were more than just a way to relay clear signals at a low cost. These systems provided the means to get local information, listen to community talent, and a reason to socialize on Saturday nights. These systems were truly community media systems in that the community members constructed these systems themselves and the orientation of the systems was to serve the community, not to make a profit. Finally, the systems illustrate the efforts made by the rural communities to participate in the communication revolution occurring in the nation as a whole. They could not create their own telegraph or telephone systems but they could tie into airwaves overhead.

Further research might want to investigate whether these systems were unique to upstate South Carolina or whether they were a common phenomenon in the rural United States. Also, it might be interesting to study the connections between such community radio systems and the later development of community antenna television systems. In addition, further work might want to consider the idea that while the wired radio brought the community together and out of isolation, perhaps the adoption of the electric radio reimposed that isolation as listeners sought to tune into the world and out of their communities.

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