

# Elinor Fox and WHB's Wartime Programming<sup>1</sup>

by

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## ABSTRACT

Kansas City's pioneer WHB is an example of how local radio could offer opportunities for innovative programming developed by an energetic career-minded woman in the late 1930s and how her responsibilities increased as men left for the military while the station adapted to a wartime mode. Placed in the context of WHB's wartime programming, this paper uses oral history research with Elinor Fox Kamen to tell how she entered radio just before World War II, wrote, produced and announced her own new programming ideas during the war and then moved out of broadcasting after the war.

When the United States entered World War II, men and women left local radio stations to join the military and station management scrambled to hold onto remaining staff members and to adapt programming to a wartime audience. Programming guidelines issued by the Office of War Information and other offices of government and industry were followed, but local stations also had opportunities to use the creative talents of their own staffs.

A case in point was how Kansas City's WHB utilized the talents of an energetic young career-minded woman programmer named Elinor Fox and how, when the war began, she adapted to the station's wartime programming mission and its staffing needs.

This case is presented as an example of a process which occurred in many industries during wartime, namely management's need for responsible employees to replace others who had left for military service, opening to women positions which had traditionally been held by men. Because most Kansas City broadcasters were males at the outbreak of World War II, and because many of these left for military service, women (as well as men deferred from the military) had an opportunity to enter the industry—at least until war's end. This is a microcosmic study, relying on oral history interviews and other primary sources used in regional and local historical research. It is intended to serve as one example which might be incorporated into fuller treatments of wartime broadcasting or of women in broadcasting. No attempt is made in this paper to examine the broader national contexts of wartime broadcasting or of women in broadcasting.<sup>2</sup>

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<sup>2</sup> The Kansas City Broadcasting Oral History Collection (KCBOHC) and the Kansas City Broadcasting Oral History Project (KCBOHP) created by William James Ryan, then Assistant Professor in the Department of Communication at Rockhurst University, may now be found in the *William James Ryan (1940- ) Papers* (KC0457), at the Western Historical Manuscript Collection-Kansas City (WHMC-KC).

## WHB'S PRE-WAR PROGRAMMING

WHB, one of the nation's pioneer radio stations, was the second oldest Kansas City station still operating in the late 1930s.<sup>3</sup> Although its other two surviving pioneer competitors had become charter network affiliates in the 1920s,<sup>4</sup> WHB not only had remained independent until joining the new Mutual Broadcasting System in the late '30s, but, after FRC reallocations in the previous decade, was the only station in Kansas City limited to day-time broadcasting. Fighting these odds with a dynamic president and a veteran staff, WHB was the only day-timer awarded *Variety's* Showmanship plaque.<sup>5</sup> WHB was allowed to boost its power to only 1,000 watts in 1938, but had a good frequency allocation at 860 kilocycles. Relying heavily on local talent, WHB was clearly the third strongest programmer in the seven-station Kansas City market at the outbreak of World War II.<sup>6</sup>

## ELINOR FOX ENTERS RADIO

Meanwhile, the recently widowed Elinor Fox (later Elinor Kamen) decided to try a broadcasting career to support herself and her daughter. She began at the financially strapped KITE, a mail-pull station willing to take a chance with anyone with a novel idea. "I had to go back to work after a marriage of seven-and-a-half years because my husband died, leaving me with a three-and-a-half year old child. I had taught in the Kansas City school system only a year. So at age 28 I had to decide on a career. I did not want to go back into the Kansas City school system," she recounted. "But eventually I had to earn a living because I was one of the few women of my generation who established her own apartment, her own menage, and didn't go back home to my parents. That required a regular salary."<sup>7</sup>

One contact was Earl Katz, a friend of her late husband. As she recounted it, he said, "Well, we have an account that owes us some money. I can't even remember who.... Oh, it's a radio station, with offices in the Fidelity Building. They can't pay their bills; they're on their way out. They owe us money. I don't think they'll pay you a salary because they

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<sup>3</sup> See William J. Ryan, "Which Came First?—65 Years of Kansas City Broadcasting," *Missouri Historical Review* LXXXII [82] (July 1988): 408-423.

<sup>4</sup> The other two pioneer stations still operating were KMBC, an original member of William Paley's Columbia Broadcasting System, owned by Midland Broadcasting Company and managed by pioneer broadcaster Arthur B. Church; and WDAF, an original member of the AT&T chain and a charter member of NBC, owned and operated by the Kansas City Star Company.

<sup>5</sup> *Variety*, 6 December 1939, 22 and 31. Donald Dwight Davis was president and commercial manager of WHB Broadcasting Company. John Schilling, one of two engineers who built the original WHB in 1922 and who still doubled as an announcer (known as the "Golden Voice" among local announcers) was vice president and station manager. Dick Smith was program director. WHB was locally owned by Cook Paint & Varnish Company.

<sup>6</sup> In addition to WHB, commercial stations serving Kansas City were KMBC, WDAF, KCMO, KITE, KCKN (Kansas City, KS) and WREN (Lawrence, KS). KOZY-FM, Kansas City's first FM station, also began broadcasting at this time.

<sup>7</sup> Elinor Fox Kamen, Interview, December 23, 1986 in *William James Ryan (1940- ) Papers* (KC0457), WHMC-KC.

have no money but you can see how good you are and learn to broadcast."<sup>8</sup> Finding a suitable program was, however, not so easy.

*I interviewed the station manager.... He said "Well, what do you intend to do?" I said it occurred to me that I would like to do answers to personal problems that people had. Dorothy Dix was in the newspapers in those days. Ann and Abbey had not yet made their appearance on the scene. I had a very good idea. I didn't know how good!*

But the station manager turned her down, explaining that a Chicago station had been sued by parents of a young woman to whom a radio counselor had given advice designed to prompt her boyfriend to marry her. He didn't and the girl committed suicide.

So the station manager told Fox, "You see, you simply can't do this. It's too risky. Come back again and change your idea.' So I came back," she smiled, "and I said I'll suggest ways people can decorate their home."<sup>9</sup> He liked this idea. She did the show, received considerable mail inquiring about home decoration, and got her experience.

But in spite of gaining experience she needed income. "This went on for some time. I thought, well, I've learned all I can learn here. I got absolutely no salary. I broadcast every day. So I went to a man named Ed Dennis who had worked for WHB many years as a salesman and was successful."

#### FOX GOES TO WHB

A combination of things came together for her next step: her degree in education and the current popularity of the national radio show, "The Quiz Kids," for intelligent youngsters who answered difficult knowledge questions.<sup>10</sup> She asked Dennis, "Why not do it locally?" He said, "That's a great idea! Get it together." She left KITE, went to work for an antique shop and let the idea germinate.

Before the U.S. entered the War, WHB's Dennis helped Fox make the transition to WHB with her local kids' quiz show, and sought sponsorship from the Grollier Society, publishers of the *Book of Knowledge*. She recalled the Grollier rep saying, "I think it's good. If it goes may we have the television rights?" Her mouth fell open. "Television had not dawned on the Kansas City scene. And I said, 'Oh, of course.' He said, 'We'll try it for 13 weeks.'" She called it "The Little Red School House."

In creating "The Little Red Schoolhouse," she devised a system to invite bright students from the Kansas City school system and taught herself how to type so she could write the script children could win a bank with 50 cents inside. Questions were

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<sup>8</sup> Elinor Fox Kamen, Interview, December 23, 1986.

<sup>9</sup> Years later, after a successful career in advertising and remarrying, she finally got her chance to help people with problems when she responded to a radio public service announcement seeking telephone counselors for Human Rescue; she volunteered there for 10 years.

<sup>10</sup> "The Quiz Kids" began 28 January 1940 on NBC.

based on material in the *Book of Knowledge*.<sup>11</sup> She produced the Saturday morning show for 26 weeks.

Then a new Grollier regional manager took over and the program was renewed another 13 weeks. But it was moved to WDAF, the NBC Red affiliate, and the format changed to pit parents against their children. Elinor did not approve this change. She also did not like it when they expected her during the week to "dress up madly" and drive to small towns in the two state region to help promote *Book of Knowledge* sales, which seemed ridiculous to her. "I can still see myself with an evening gown with many sequins on it in some little hick town with a train whistle interrupting the questions." It had been her concept, her program, and they were trying to change it. "This went on for thirteen weeks. It was not successful," she recalled clearly. She and the sponsor parted ways.

Deciding to persist in radio, she again went to Dennis with a new idea. Again he liked it, so back at WHB she began to write, produce and announce "Women in the News," now using the radio name of Alice Gay, presumably to identify with her sponsor, AG Grocers.

"Women in the News" was unlike other women's shows which offered either home-making advice or live interviews of visiting celebrities, usually stage and screen stars. Instead, "Women in the News" highlighted activities of women who were not housewives, women of diverse interests and occupations, and not necessarily well-known. And it was not a live interview program. When newsworthy women visited Kansas City, Fox interviewed them away from WHB, then went home and typed her script at night for the next morning's show.

Local women were interviewed where they worked. When the U.S. entered the war, she included appropriate themes. She remembered:

*I went to North American Aviation when women were first working on the assembly lines. I went to a circus and interviewed refugee high wire artists in their trailer. I interviewed a charming old lady in North Kansas City who at one hundred and something was still doing quilts—one of Kansas City's 'Grandma Moses's'.... I think there must have been several hundred people.*

She also interviewed one of the first women working in the brokerage business, a popular female novelist and, once late at night, Gypsy Rose Lee between acts at the Tower Theater.<sup>12</sup>

In many ways and in retrospect one might say Elinor Fox was a feminist using radio as a medium of communication. But when interviewed in 1988, she insisted that she had not tried to be a pioneer; for her, this had been just a way to support herself and her

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<sup>11</sup> Elinor Fox Kamen, Interview, December 23, 1986. Cf. WHB Advertisement, *Broadcasting Yearbook*, 1946.

<sup>12</sup> Elinor Fox Kamen, Interview, December 23, 1986.

daughter without relying on support from her family. Self-sufficiency was her goal, radio a means to that end.

She might have gone further up the broadcasting career ladder, if moving to a larger market means higher career achievement. Don Davis, WHB president, recognized her talents and encouraged such a move. In October 1941, Davis gave her an excellent recommendation in a letter to Frank Schreiber, WGN, Chicago. Davis promoted her potential for a larger market. "She has several good program ideas," he wrote, "coupled with the ability and intelligence to effectively present her own or any shows in which you might see fit to use her."<sup>13</sup> But she did not aspire to a long-term broadcasting career. To leave Kansas City for WGN would require her to leave her child with her parents, contradicting her only reason to be in radio: financial independence. She remained in Kansas City at WHB.

### WHB'S WARTIME PROGRAMMING

WHB had three homemaker shows: "Mary Logan's Kitchen" (9:15 a.m.), which began November 4, 1940, for Swift & Company; "Mary Ann Milgram" (10:00 a.m., then at various mid-morning and early afternoon times—as many as three a day in 1942), for Milgram's grocery stores; and, "Sally Adams at the Market," also inaugurated in 1940.<sup>14</sup>

As the U.S. entered World War II, WHB proclaimed, December 8, 1941:

*From this day forward...until victory is won...WHB can best serve the public interest, convenience and necessity by doing everything within our power to help win the war. We should do this not by the dedication of mere radio facilities to the war effort, but by devoting our hearts, our minds and our especial skills as radio showmen to the War needs of our community and of our nation. Specifically it is our job to integrate a vital means of mass communication with the many-sided problem of winning the War.*<sup>15</sup>

Banners blaring "WHB at WAR" hung on studio walls in a graphic statement of the station's patriotic efforts.

WHB's day did not end before "Superman" fought for "Truth, Justice and The American Way," or "Jack Armstrong" traded secret decoders and bombsights for breakfast cereal box tops, fighting evil in quarter-hour battles, weekdays over Mutual at 5:30 p.m. At six, Fulton Lewis, Jr. gave his news commentary, followed by Mutual's "The Johnson Family" and "Red Ryder." Cal Tinney reported the last WHB news of the day at 7 p.m. (1942).<sup>16</sup> By now, WHB received both Mutual news and the Associated Press 24-hour wire service.

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<sup>13</sup> He underlined "any". Donald Dwight Davis to Frank Schreiber, letter, 13 October 1941, original in the possession of Elinor Fox Kamen.

<sup>14</sup> Cf. Advertisement, *Broadcasting Yearbook, 1946*, and representative *Kansas City Star* radio schedules, 1940-1945.

<sup>15</sup> Advertisement, *Broadcasting Yearbook, 1946*.

<sup>16</sup> "1944 Annual Report," Cook Paint & Varnish Co., 1945. Cf. *Kansas City Star*, 13 September 1942.

Because things cannot be normal during wartime, under OWI guidelines WHB stopped announcing weather reports and forecasts, kept the studios locked to outsiders, and did no more programming with impromptu comments—no man-on-the-street interviews, no spontaneous information from a remote broadcast.<sup>17</sup> WHB participated in rehearsals for city black-outs and air raids. Employees participated in the first War Loan Drive through a payroll deduction plan and arrived at work in car pools to conserve rationed gasoline. Dick Smith became WHB's War Program Director. The first Army-Navy "E" Award ceremonies in K.C. were on WHB and "The Kiddie Revue" was converted into the "War Bond Show." The daily "Staff Frolic" was broadcast from the Kansas City Canteen. Mutual sent WHB listeners first-hand accounts of the Allies' invasion of Africa (November 8, 1942), as well as other continuous news of the war as allowed by government censorship guidelines. "Your Navy Speaks," was a weekly WHB feature sent out over the Kansas Network.<sup>18</sup>

#### ELINOR FOX AND WHB'S WARTIME PROGRAMMING

In 1942, Elinor Fox's "Women in the News" began at 8:30 a.m.,<sup>19</sup> still sponsored by the AG Grocer. "I'd interrupt my superb prose with three cans of green beans," she smiled. On March 24, the theme was "'V' For Victory." She opened:

*Again good morning everyone. The women of America are working in a victory campaign to gather ten million books for Uncle Sam's armed forces—will you lend a hand, too?*

Her woman in the news that day was Miss Dorothea Hyle, Director of Publicity for the Kansas City Public Libraries.<sup>20</sup>

Radio made it difficult to avoid the effects of the war during 1943 and 1944. WHB devoted an 18-hour day on April 12, 1943, to sell War Bonds. For the Third War Loan drive, WHB paraded through downtown on a "Bond Wagon" with orchestras and smiling members of the WAVES and WACS. WHB, like other stations, continually urged conservation of electricity, gasoline, food and any material used in the war industry, such as tin cans, rubber goods and old rags. Recruiting for the Coast Guard and Merchant Marines was included with Selective Service information. WHB urged support of the USO. And, following the wartime code, discouraged the spread of rumors.

As more men left for the war, Elinor Fox took on early morning news duties at WHB. "When men became scarce, men broadcasters, I actually came down at 6:30 in the morning, pulled news off the tape, edited that news and broadcast [it]. She wasn't paid

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<sup>17</sup> Cf. "Censors Tighten Rules on Radio Audience Shows," *Advertising Age*, 19 January 1942, 13:8; "War-time Code of Practices for Broadcasters," *Broadcasting*, 19 January 1942, 11; and, "Wartime Restraints," pamphlet, American Civil Liberties Union, March, 1942, in Robert E. Summers, ed., *Wartime Press Censorship of Radio* (New York: The H.W. Wilson Company, 1942), 100-101; and, WHB Advertisement, *Broadcasting Yearbook*, 1946.

<sup>18</sup> WHB Advertisement, *Broadcasting Yearbook*, 1946.

<sup>19</sup> *Kansas City Journal*, 16 March 1942, 15.

<sup>20</sup> Elinor Fox, original typed script, in the possession Elinor Fox Kamen.

as well as the men she replaced, "I would say a third or less," she recalled. "I think they regarded it as one would a precocious child. It seemed that way to me."

War Loan drives increased in 1944, with broadcasts in January, June and November. During the June drive, WHB's "Magic Carpet" (a short wave radio relay transmitter) was strapped to a landing craft which charged through waves to deliver soldiers ashore somewhere on an unnamed beachhead. The sound effects must have been dramatic! A Red Cross fundraiser was sent over the Kansas Network from WHB. And, a Firepower Campaign in October recruited workers for ordinance plants. The annual golf tournament broadcast from Hillcrest Country Club was a benefit for the military entertainment fund. The June 6th D-Day broadcast peaked radio listening charts. And in December, WHB sponsored a local appearance of Mutual's Fulton Lewis, Jr., at the Music Hall.<sup>21</sup>

In event-filled 1945, WHB kept up with its competition. Following Roosevelt's death, WHB originated a "home town program" about Truman, broadcast over Mutual Friday morning, April 13. Truman's former neighbors, associates and friends were interviewed. When Truman decided to use atomic bombs to end the Pacific War, some WHB listeners may recall the sullen voice of Mutual's William Lang reporting the destruction, August 6. Then, as victory parades of returning military men and women streamed through downtown Kansas City, WHB microphones picked up addresses by such war heroes as Generals Dwight D. Eisenhower, George C. Marshall, and Jonathan M. Wainwright. Even after the war, a seventh War Loan campaign was broadcast.

Post-war programming and community service efforts resumed. John Schilling produced the annual Infantile Paralysis benefit broadcast. No longer restricted by the wartime Code of Practices, "Man On the Street" resumed, sponsored by Metro-Goldwyn-Mayer. WHB programming was paying off.

WHB's promotional campaign, symbolized by its Girl on the Swing, swung into successful 1945 November Hooper Index ratings which showed WHB first among five other unidentified stations weekdays, 8 a.m. to 12 p.m., weekdays, noon through 6 p.m. and Saturday 8 a.m. to 6 p.m. WHB bragged: "The vibrant surge of WHB's progress stems from the tradition that WHB is Where Headlines Begin. Here our standing instruction to the Staff is: 'Yesterday is past. Tomorrow may never come. Today is the only day that counts, and right now is the time for you to give the very best you have!'"

Elinor Fox decided to give the best she had somewhere else. Her belief that she had been paid less than men doing the same work led her into a new field. "That's why I started writing advertising and eventually obtained clients of my own, accounts of my own and for many, many years did advertising." Joining her brother in an advertising agency, she left radio at war's end and became successful in her new career.

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<sup>21</sup> *Broadcasting Yearbook, 1946.*

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