"The More They Listen, the More They Buy"
Radio and the Modernizing of Rural America, 1930–1939

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Radio was one of several technologies that early twentieth-century reformers promoted as a means of modernizing and improving rural American life. Although the new medium was introduced in the 1920s, it was during the Depression decade of the 1930s that most rural families bought their first set. With the coming of radio, formerly isolated rural homes had access to world news, current weather and market reports, and a host of USDA-produced agricultural programs. However, it was the national network entertainment programs with their many advertisements that promised Depression-era rural listeners a better tomorrow in the form of a modernized urban consumer lifestyle. This article explores the coming of radio to rural areas during the 1930s and reviews some contemporary industry research findings on rural radio usage and consumer behavior.

By the beginning of the twentieth century, many Progressive Era reformers had become concerned that rural America was being left behind in the nation’s rapid technical and social evolution. The fears were such that in 1908 President Theodore Roosevelt appointed a Commission on Country Life to study the nation’s rural problems and make recommendations for

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change. Underlying these concerns was the alarm of the middle classes over the steady migration of rural dwellers into urban areas where the demand for factory labor was growing. As an increasing number of marginal farmers abandoned their land, reformers were apprehensive over both the loss of the agrarian lifestyle and the economic consequences such changes might bring. Many concluded that the solution was rural modernization—a transformation of rural life into something more nearly like that enjoyed by the growing urban and suburban middle class.¹

Initially, reform focused on such goals as updating farming methods, improving rural schools, and upgrading health services, but as time went on, the introduction of new technology was seen as a key to addressing many rural problems. Ronald Kline argues that reformers saw four innovations in particular—"the telephone, the automobile, radio, and electricity"—as essential to modernizing rural life. In fact, he argues, these technologies were inscribed "with a largely unquestioned power to transform an old-fashioned rural society into an agrarian version of middle-class, urban consumer culture."²

By the 1920s all four technologies had been introduced in rural areas, and by 1930 over half of farms in the United States had automobiles, about a third had telephones, and smaller percentages had electricity and radio. However, the coming of the Great Depression altered adoption patterns considerably. Throughout the 1930s the percentage of farm homes with automobiles remained flat, while the number with telephones substantially declined. Yet during the same period, the number of rural families owning radios nearly tripled, and by 1940 more farm homes owned radios than had telephones, automobiles, or electricity.³

There were several reasons for radio's rapid adoption during the Depression years. By the early 1930s sets had become affordable. Not only did prices drop dramatically, but many retailers offered easy credit. Once paid for, the radio provided an endless supply of seemingly free programming, unlike cars and telephones that represented a continuing financial outlay. At the same time, radio manufacturers began marketing specially-designed battery-powered "farm radios," which meant that rural families did not have to wait for the construction of local power lines before buying their first set. The 1930s also saw the maturation of the radio broadcasting industry, resulting in improved signals and more and better programs.⁴
For many rural families, radio's real attraction during the Depression years was its promise of a better life—a modern new age to come. While other new technologies made life physically easier or more convenient, radio touched the imagination by opening a window on the outside world. News and information programs kept rural listeners in touch with current events and issues, while entertainment and advertising presented images of a modern urban consumer lifestyle that many rural families found compelling. It was this ability to supply daily contact with the rest of the world that was radio's most important feature for rural America. In 1925 one farm housewife expressed it this way:

The radio service is a godsend to isolated families. When something happens, as something may do, and the receiver is temporarily disabled, it's like sickness in the house. Perhaps it isn't the entertainment that counts so much. I'm ready to say that it isn't. But just the human contact, the privilege of getting next to folks, of learning another's voice well enough to say, "That's Jeff." It's so comfortable.\(^5\)

As radio helped dispel rural isolation, it also served to convey and reinforce the notion of a single, American national identity. The economics of the radio industry favored national networks that provided the same programs to large areas of the country. As a result, producers and advertisers tended to emphasize national commonalities over regional interests. In so doing, radio presented America to its listeners as a land of one single people, albeit with a diversity of backgrounds and tastes. Consequently, the radio, especially in the 1930s when most rural families bought their first set, helped modernize rural life by bringing formerly isolated people into the cultural and economic American mainstream. In doing so, the radio contributed profoundly to the creation of a modern consumer culture.\(^6\)

Radio's remarkable potential had been recognized from the very start. First introduced in the United States in the early 1920s, the new medium was a national sensation. The number of stations grew quickly, and by 1930 there were 618 licensed stations on the air and an estimated fourteen million US homes owned radios. Three national broadcasting networks had been established and radio advertising revenues topped forty million dollars a year.\(^7\)
However, the radio boom of the 1920s was largely an urban phenomenon. While half of American urban homes had a receiver by 1930, only 27 percent of rural homes did. At the same time, radio ownership varied widely by region, and only 9 percent of rural homes in the poverty-stricken southern states had sets. Yet during the 1930s, the situation changed markedly. By 1940 nearly 70 percent of all rural homes had radios, and outside the South, that figure was 84 percent.8

The later adoption of radio by rural families was the result of several factors. Sets of the 1920s were expensive, and most rural families simply could not afford them. Furthermore, to get good reception from distant stations, rural listeners had to invest in better, more expensive receivers. Yet, with the onset of the Depression, deflation and streamlined manufacturing techniques dropped the average price for a new radio from $136 in 1929 to just $47 in 1932, and by 1938 the average price for a set was down to $35. In addition, major retailers began offering time payment plans that allowed customers to purchase radios with small monthly payments.9

Another factor that slowed rural adoption was the uneven geographic distribution of early radio stations. Radio evolved primarily as a profit-making enterprise, and most stations were constructed in urban areas to reach the maximum number of listeners. Early transmitters were relatively low-powered and often had limited range. While some rural homes were close enough to population centers to receive strong signals, many were not, and the unpredictable propagation of AM radio waves in the standard broadcast band meant reception in more remote areas was often unreliable. The lack of effective government regulation until the passage of the Radio Act of 1927 added to the problem. Reception was especially spotty in the southern states where few entrepreneurs found it profitable to operate stations.10

With the implementation of new federal broadcast regulations in the late 1920s, the situation slowly began to improve. Interference was reduced, and the newly-created Federal Radio Commission (FRC) permitted some stations to increase transmitting power. The commission set aside forty frequencies specifically for the use of high-powered stations, whose nighttime signals would be able to cover large areas of the country with a minimum amount of interference. Most of these "clear channel" stations could be heard at night several hundred miles away. While there were also lower-powered local and regional stations that many rural listeners
could receive, a 1935 government survey showed that 76.3 percent of rural radio owners tuned to a clear channel station as their first choice. Most of these powerful clear channel stations were affiliated with one of the major networks and provided rural audiences many of the same programs—and commercials—heard by urban listeners.\textsuperscript{11}

As time went on, receiver technology also improved so that newer sets were better able to pick up weak signals and reject interference. However, radio signals remained unreliable in some areas, and as late as 1946 over a third of rural listeners still reported having reception difficulties. Therefore, they did not have access to the same variety of programs as urban listeners.\textsuperscript{12}

Rural radio owners also faced the problem of providing electrical power for their sets. Virtually all early radio receivers used inefficient vacuum tubes that consumed large amounts of electrical current. In 1930 only 10 percent of farm homes had electricity, and it would not be until the mid-1940s that even half were on the power grid. To address this problem, radio set manufacturers offered special “farm radios,” with circuitry designed to pull in distant stations while operating on battery power. Although set technology constantly improved, a typical farm radio of the 1930s required batteries weighing as much as fifty pounds.\textsuperscript{13}

In spite of these difficulties, by the 1930s many farm families began to consider radio a necessity, and throughout the decade the percentage of rural homes with radios steadily increased. Although the continuing hardships of the Depression years meant that money was tight, rural families bought radios, often by working extra hours or sacrificing other purchases. In addition, communal listening was common, with neighbors often gathering to listen to special programs. In some communities, public receivers were placed in central locations such as schools and town halls, and rural businesses often installed radios so that customers could hear news, weather, and market reports.\textsuperscript{14}

One driving force behind the purchase of new radios was the Depression itself. The economic downturn touched every aspect of American life, and the radio provided a much-needed way to stay in touch with news of the crisis and the government’s response to it. In rural areas, newspapers and magazines could only provide information that was days or weeks old, but owning a radio meant up-to-the-minute news was constantly available. With the election of Franklin Roosevelt in 1932, many found a new incentive for radio ownership. Roosevelt was a master radio
During the Great Depression, rural people bought radios in greater numbers than before. FSA-OWI Collection, Prints & Photographs Division, Library of Congress, reproduction number, LC-USF3-012735-M4.

The fact that the radio was not just for entertainment helped many farm families justify the purchase of their first set. The availability of weather forecasts and agricultural market reports often guided farm decision-making, and numerous magazine articles and radio advertisements of the time report farmers who, thanks to radio, were able to save a crop from an early freeze or increase profits through better timing of market deliveries.16

The USDA recognized the value of radio at an early date. A special Radio Division was organized, and beginning in the 1920s it supplied stations with free radio scripts on a variety of agricultural and home economics topics. By 1930 some 214 stations were carrying USDA-supplied programs each day, but the centerpiece of the agency's effort was The National Farm and Home Hour. Broadcast daily around the noon hour
over many NBC affiliates, the program was a blend of entertainment and agricultural information. Between acts such as The Homesteaders Orchestra and country comedienne Mirandy of Persimmon Hollow, listeners heard talks from the secretary of agriculture, reports on new pig feeds, and interviews with winners of national 4-H competitions. The Farm and Home Hour audience was estimated at one point to be as large as ten thousand, including a significant listenership in urban areas, which the USDA felt helped make city dwellers more aware of farm problems. 

Although rural listeners found agricultural information programs useful, they, like their urban counterparts, were mostly attracted to the entertainment radio provided. By the mid-1930s the networks and larger stations had fully-developed prime time schedules of shows featuring big-name stars, and rural Americans became avid listeners. The Cooperative Analysis of Broadcasting (CAB), an industry-sponsored audience measurement group, found that rural and urban audiences favored many of the same programs. For example, during the evening hours, The Chase and Sanborn Hour, a comedy variety show hosted by ventriloquist Edgar Bergen and his dummy Charlie McCarthy, was ranked first in popularity among both rural and city audiences. Likewise, The Jack Benny Program was ranked second among both audiences. However, there were a few programs that clearly had a distinctly rural appeal. The National Barn Dance, a country music variety show, ranked fifth in popularity among rural audiences but thirtieth in the cities. Conversely, Kraft Music Hall, starring crooner Bing Crosby, ranked fifth in large cities but eighteenth among rural audiences. In general, rural listeners had a stronger preference for news and drama programs and a weaker preference for variety shows and dance music than urban dwellers.

This CAB study was a rare early attempt to measure program preferences among the rural audience, since radio audience ratings surveys of the 1930s were routinely conducted by telephone calls placed only in the larger cities. Surveyors omitted rural regions due to the prohibitive cost of long distance calling and the relatively low percentage of rural homes with telephones.

By the end of the decade, the paucity of data on rural listeners had become a concern to the radio networks. As one industry group put it, “it was apparent that radio programs were receiving wide circulation throughout the rural areas, but how wide and how intensive were matters
of conjecture.” Although it was known that the number of rural radio listeners had grown rapidly during the 1930s, few national sponsors were willing to pay increased rates to reach an audience they considered to be made up of relatively unimportant consumers. Low Depression-era farm incomes, geographic isolation, and the backcountry traits of thrift and self-reliance meant rural dwellers traditionally had been seen as marginal consumers, purchasing far fewer store-bought goods than their urban counterparts.20

Yet by the late 1930s, patterns of rural consumption had begun to change, and broadcasters were eager to exploit this emerging market by convincing advertisers of the wisdom of targeting rural audiences. In a 1937 report distributed to its major clients, NBC pointed out that farm income was at its highest level since the beginning of the Depression and that rural business was “strongly on the upgrade.” Half the nation’s consumers lived in rural areas, the network argued, and so national advertisers should be looking to radio as “the best new approach to this vast and reinvigorated market.” In addition, the network pointed out that:

the favorite programs of rural listeners include many of the same sponsored network programs which rank highest with the industrial and city population—evidence that the farmer does not belong to a race apart, and that his tastes are becoming increasingly similar to those of the city dweller.21

To bolster such claims, the major networks funded several special research projects during the late 1930s that sought to document rural radio listening and consumer behavior. While these studies were clearly designed to support radio industry assertions, and their results must be approached with caution, they represent the most extensive research on rural radio audience behavior conducted during the 1930s.22

One of the first of these projects was carried out in summer 1936 and funded by NBC. To conduct the research, the network hired Charles Morrow Wilson. Wilson was a writer who had gained national attention two years earlier for his book Backwoods America, a look at contemporary life and society in the Ozarks. In what the network called “a nation-wide observational study,” Wilson visited farm families and rural shopkeepers in twenty-five states to conduct informal interviews on radio listening and
its impact on rural life. Wilson’s published findings included such general- 
ities as “radio is building for itself a distinctive place in the routine of farm 
living,” and “farm interests are broadened to a point where they are genu-
inely cosmopolitan.” He also selectively reported comments by rural 
merchants regarding the effectiveness of radio advertising. Several of these 
mentioned an increasing demand by rural consumers for heavily adver-
tised name-brand items. One rural drugstore owner reported that “the 
National Barn Dance has changed Alka-Seltzer from next to nothing at 
all, to one of the fastest-selling items in this store,” and that “Amos ‘n’ 
Andy built up Pepsodent sales to a point where there have repeatedly 
been times when I simply couldn’t get the merchandise through my job-
bers.” Other merchants provided anecdotes of how radio advertising had 
boosted sales of other national brands such as Jell-O, Chase and Sanborn 
Coffee, and Ovaltine.  

A year after the Wilson interviews, NBC, CBS, and other radio inter-
ests formed “The Joint Committee” and planned a much more ambitious 
study. To insure the credibility of their research among potential advertis-
ers, the survey methodology was carefully designed and executed with 
some twenty thousand personal interviews conducted among rural radio 
owners living in a sample of ninety-six rural counties in all parts of the 
country. Professional radio researchers from the Hooper-Holmes Bureau 
were employed to conduct the face-to-face interviews that took place in a 
single nine-day period in October and November 1937.  

The published results presented few surprises, but the study did help to 
document the contention that, with relatively minor exceptions, rural 
radio listeners behaved much like their urban counterparts. The major 
findings focused on radio ownership and time spent listening. It was esti-
imated that some 69 percent of all US rural families owned radios, al-
though there were substantial regional differences. For example, more 
than 96 percent of rural homes had radios in California, Washington, Or-
egon, Massachusetts, and Rhode Island but less than 50 percent did in 
most of the relatively poorer states of the Old South. Secondly, rural radio 
families tended to use their sets somewhat more than their urban counter-
parts. For example, 88.5 percent of rural radio families said they listened 
to radio at some time every day compared to 79.8 percent of urban radio 
owners. In rural radio homes, the set was reported to be on a median of 
4 hours and 47 minutes daily, compared to just 4 hours and 9 minutes in
urban radio homes. At any given time on an average weekday evening, about half of all rural radio homes were tuned in.\textsuperscript{25}

Six months after the Joint Committee survey, CBS funded a new survey that used similar methodology but focused on documenting changes in rural consumer behavior. Broadcasters theorized that as the Depression weakened and farm incomes rose, rural families were increasingly traveling to town to purchase the products touted on radio commercials. The CBS study found considerable evidence to support this claim. Overall, a correlation was found between the amount of radio listening and the number of advertised goods purchased. As CBS concluded, "the more they listen, the more they buy." Over 90 percent of the respondents said they purchased advertised brands of soap and toothpaste, and over 80 percent bought brand-name kitchen cleanser, cereal, coffee, and face powder.\textsuperscript{26}

Although the major network studies were methodologically sound, the findings were proprietary and not all were made public. The CBS network released some results in a lavish, heavily illustrated promotional book aimed at catching the attention of national advertisers. Not unexpectedly, the volume contained only those findings that CBS found most compelling in its arguments.\textsuperscript{27}

The real value of the networks' studies may be less in the findings they chose to publish and more in what their actions reveal about the changing attitudes of advertisers and broadcasters toward the rural radio audience. By the late 1930s the networks were urging advertisers to think of rural listeners as part of a unified national audience who were becoming more like their urban counterparts, both in the programs they listened to and in the products they purchased.

Kline rejects the blanket term "modernization" when referring to the rural transformation brought about by technology during this period. He points out that rural people were often resistant to the changes that these new devices offered and instead chose to purchase them selectively and create what he calls "individual modernities." Indeed, at the same time that rural ownership rates of automobiles and telephones stagnated or even declined during the 1930s, radio was proving tremendously popular. Despite an economic depression that saw many families struggling just to feed and clothe themselves, rural radio ownership climbed from 27 percent of homes in 1930 to nearly 70 percent by 1940.\textsuperscript{28}
Mary Neth has pointed out that “radio introduced farm people to new forms of mass culture, leisure, and consumer goods, but it did not destroy their rural way of living.” Certainly the popularity of such programs as *The National Farm and Home Hour* and *National Barn Dance* testify to the fact that rural families did put radio to somewhat different uses than their urban counterparts. Yet industry research suggests that by the end of the 1930s, rural and urban audience program tastes were far more alike than different and that rural families were increasingly adopting the trappings of the consumer culture.29

Of the new technologies seen as key to the modernizing of rural America, radio alone gave rural families a new vision of their place in the world. While developments such as the automobile made it easier to travel to town, radio opened a window on future possibilities. Although instant access to news, weather, and agricultural information was important, it was radio’s entertainment programming with its tantalizing advertisements
that showed Depression-era rural families the lifestyle a modernized rural America would bring.

With radio came advertising, and rural families began to be inundated with modern commercials designed to create a need for a whole range of manufactured goods many had never previously purchased. These advertisements presented a modernized American consumer lifestyle where problems could be solved by purchasing products. Although rural families had long been exposed to manufactured goods through mail order catalogs and print advertising, network radio advertisements were sophisticated, ubiquitous, and compelling. Furthermore, radio commercials, especially those heard on the national networks, were for products that symbolized the essence of modern urban culture—prepared foods, toiletries, cosmetics, and automobiles.

While radio was not the only influence on rural attitudes during the 1930s, it played a pivotal, yet often unrecognized, role in changing daily rural life. By the beginning of the 1940s, the groundwork had been laid for radio to provide the national communication link essential to bringing the country together to meet the challenges that lay ahead.

NOTES

3. Ibid., 5.
4. By the 1930s radio programs were increasingly supported by advertising. Because advertising costs are ultimately passed on to the consumer, radio programming only seems free. In addition, radio owners had the ongoing costs of tube and battery replacement. During the early 1920s all radio receivers were battery powered, but by 1927 AC-powered sets had begun to appear. The term “farm radio” began to be used to refer to sets that remained powered by batteries. Several technical refinements were introduced making farm radios more efficient and improving their performance in rural locations. For an overview of early rural radio history, see, Symposium on Radio in Rural America, Journal of Radio Studies 8 (Winter 2001), especially Robert L. Hilliard, “Farm and Rural Radio—Some Beginnings and Models”: 321–29; Steve Craig, “‘The Farmer’s Friend’: Radio Comes to Rural America, 1920–1927”: 330–46; and Jacob Podber, “Early Radio in Rural Appalachia: An Oral History”: 388–410.
6. The term “isolation” here refers not only to the varying degree of access that rural families had to personal contact with others but also access to information about the outside


9. These are national averages. Many rural families paid higher prices due to the need for better sets that could be powered by batteries. See, William Rupert MacIaurin, Invention & Innovation in the Radio Industry (New York: Macmillan Company, 1949), 139.

10. All AM radio broadcasting in the United States takes place in the Medium Wave
(MW) frequency band. After sunset, radio waves in the MW band can travel hundreds of miles due to atmospheric refraction, greatly extending a station’s nighttime range but also creating interference with other stations. The amount of atmospheric refraction can vary with the season and other factors, making distant reception unpredictable. After 1927 government regulations required most radio stations to reduce power or go off the air after dark as a way of minimizing interference with the larger “clear channel” stations (see below). The alternative, FM radio broadcasting, was only on the air experimentally during the 1930s. For a fuller discussion of factors affecting radio adoption, see, Craig, “How America Adopted Radio,” 179–95.


15. A 1946 survey of rural radio listeners conducted by the USDA found that more than 80 percent of men and 70 percent of women listed “news” as the type of program they would miss most. See USDA, Attitudes of Rural People, 74. While Roosevelt made many radio speeches, only about thirty or so were considered “fireside chats.” See Betty Houchin Winfield, FDR and the News Media (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1990), 103–111. On listener reaction to FDR’s speeches, see, Douglas B. Craig, Fireside Politics: Radio and Political Culture in the United States, 1920–1940 (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2000), 188–89.

16. One very early survey of rural radio owners found that 46 percent of respondents could give specific examples of how using radio had saved or made them money. See, “What the Farmer Listens To,” Radio Broadcast 9 (Aug. 1926): 316–17. Many articles about radio’s practical advantages appeared in farm periodicals of the era and were often authored by personnel from the USDA’s Radio Division. The USDA was a major promoter of rural radio and urged the purchase of sets at every opportunity. See, for example, Milton S. Eisenhower,


18. There were numerous “barn dance” format shows broadcast by clear channel stations around the country. Usually airing on Saturday night, many had strong regional followings among rural audiences. The *Grand Ole Opry*, produced and broadcast across the southeast by clear channel giant WSM, would eventually have much to do with making Nashville the capital of country music. *The National Barn Dance* originated at WLS in Chicago and was especially popular across the country since portions of the weekly show were carried nationally on NBC. See, George C. Biggar, “The WLS National Barn Dance Story: The Early Years,” *John Edwards Memorial Foundation Quarterly* (Aug. 1971): 105–12; Warren B. Dygert, *Radio as an Advertising Medium* (1939, repr., New York: Garland Publishing Inc., 1985), 83–85. Although program preference clearly reflects rural-urban social differences, at least some of the difference during the 1930s was due to the inconsistency of rural reception. That is, not all rural listeners could reliably receive all network programs all the time.


24. *The Joint Committee Study of Rural Radio Ownership*, 4–5. Hoover-Holmes was the marketing research firm that conducted the urban phone calls on which national radio program ratings were based. National advertisers were becoming increasingly sophisticated in their use of research data and would have found unpersuasive any data produced using suspect methodology.
25. *The Joint Committee Study of Rural Radio Ownership*, 6. The survey attempted to measure the time spent listening to radio by asking respondents to furnish an estimate. Later audience research using mechanical devices attached to radios demonstrated that respondent estimates were almost always overstated.


