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"IT'S WHEELING STEEL; THE ORIGINAL EMPLOYEE FAMILY BROADCAST,"
Radio Program Archives Donated to Regional History Collection

The blast of the Wheeling Steel mill whistle was a pervasive sound in the Ohio Valley during the late 1930s and early 1940s. Its call punctuated each working day, summoning thousands of employees to the workplace and marking time for all within earshot. The whistle had an entirely different meaning to those living beyond the confines of the valley, however. To millions of radio fans across America the whistle's call was a summons to entertainment, a shrill prelude to one of the nation's most popular radio programs: "It's Wheeling Steel, Featuring the Musical Steelmakers."

Billed as the "original employee family broadcast," "It's Wheeling Steel" began as an experiment in commercial advertising and employee relations. About 1930, Wheeling Steel's advertising director, John L. Grimes, speculated that it would be cheaper for the company to produce a weekly half-hour radio program for a period of one month than to take a single back page cover advertisement in the SATURDAY EVENING POST.

Grimes was, of course, not the first corporate executive to recognize the advertising potential of the new medium of radio. In fact, corporate sponsorship of popular radio programs was firmly established by the 1930s. Colgate-Palmolive, Bristol Myers, Purina and many other large corporations sponsored nationally broadcast half-hour...
Sample sound files from A&M 3470, Wheeling Steel Radio Program Sound Recordings and Records:

"It's Wheeling Steel" program introduction with Red Label advertisement, 1:51 seconds.

"Insist Upon Red Label" and "Look for Red Label" advertisements, 16 and 27 seconds respectively.

Lamont O'Brien's trumpet impression of "Dinah", 2:37 seconds.

"By The Light of the Silvery Moon", 2:39 seconds.
shows like "Stop Me If You've Heard This One," with Milton Berle (Quaker Oats); "The Jello Program" starring Jack Benny (General Foods); and "Town Hall Tonight" with Fred Allen, Portland Hoffa, and Peter Van Steedan's Orchestra (Bristol Myers).

Smaller companies and organizations sponsored programs which aired locally in cities throughout the country. In Wheeling, the Stogie Makers Union sponsored a musical program which aired for 13 weeks over WWVA in 1932. The program ran an additional 13 weeks under the sponsorship of the Marsh Tobacco Company.

The program that Grimes had in mind had one fundamental difference from other corporate broadcasts. Instead of merely financing performances by professional entertainers, Grimes proposed that his show, a musical variety show, would feature the company from start to finish. Wheeling Steel would provide not just the sponsorship of the program, but the substance as well. Central to his idea was the participation of the company's huge "family" of employees and their relations in providing low cost "amateur" entertainment.

Grimes' plan was initially met by company officials with considerable skepticism. Several officials questioned the effectiveness of radio in advertising products other than home consumables like toothpaste and oatmeal. Others had no desire to see the company go into "show business." The tremendous growth of radio during the 1930s and the popularity of musical performance that Grimes incorporated in other company advertising activities eventually changed their minds. Notable in the latter regard, were performances by company employee ensembles such as Lou Salvatore's "Noveltreers" which appeared at events such as the annual National Cornhusking Championship during the mid 1930s. According to newspaper accounts, musical performances in the Wheeling Steel display tent at the championship each year literally "stole the show."

Grimes finally received approval to implement his plan during the summer of 1936. A contract was signed to broadcast the program over Wheeling's WWVA which was already well-known to local listeners for its country music program The West Virginia Jamboree.
As Grimes had predicted, “It’s Wheeling Steel” caught on instantly with local listeners, especially within the Wheeling Steel family, due to its “homey” nature. Employees began immediately to refer to the program as “our show” and to Wheeling Steel as “our company.” Even listeners who were not affiliated with Wheeling Steel felt a kinship to the show due to its local origins and its “plain folk” cast. Grimes responded by placing an even greater emphasis on the show’s family slant as time passed.

During the show’s second season, “It’s Wheeling Steel” was billed as an “All Employee Broadcast” for the first time. The role of company headliners was augmented, and an arranger, Maury Longfellow, was engaged to prepare original music. Grimes also sought to “firm up” the employee connections of the orchestra. Musicians with no link to the company either found or received one. In order to underscore the band’s “family” status, band members began to appear in employee headliner roles. The season premiere on September 12, 1937, featured saxophonist Verdi Howells who announcer Pat Patterson noted was “employed in the machine shop of the Yorkville works.”

In ensuing weeks a succession of talented amateur headliners appeared on the show. Several, by popular demand, came back again and again. Especially notable were a trio of Wheeling high school girls billed as the “Steele Sisters,” (6) and a quartet of “Singing Millmen.” Also introduced in 1937/38 was a series of “capsule classics” which familiarized listeners with the great works of classical music through two minute condensed versions arranged by the show’s new arranger, Maury Longfellow.

“IT'S Wheeling Steel's” popularity grew steadily as the second season progressed. By December, with the local listeners in his pocket, Grimes was ready for bigger challenges. Persuading the company to purchase a half-hour test slot on the 17 radio station Mutual Broadcasting System network, Grimes groomed his production to jump from local to coast-to-coast fame. On January 2, 1938, the sound of the Musical Steelmakers was beamed from Maine to California.

The results of “It’s Wheeling Steel’s” national debut exceeded even Grimes’ expectations; the program became an overnight sensation. Within days LIFE magazine dispatched photographer Alfred Eisenstadt to Wheeling to capture the essence of the new phenomenon in a pictorial expose juxtaposing photos of cast members in the mill and on the stage. Reviews of the programs and its novel origins soon appeared in RADIO GUIDE, BILLBOARD, and VARIETY. And in the months that followed, “It’s Wheeling Steel” became a fixture on MBS. As its fame and popularity grew, so did the quality of the show’s performances.

During the 1938/39 season a new arranger named Lew Davies joined the show. A native of Ashland, Kentucky, Davies was a graduate of the Cincinnati Conservatory of Music. Having formerly worked with the Tommy Tucker Band, Davies’ arrangements brought the Steelmakers Orchestra to the cutting edge of the big band sound. In homage to the program and its noble goals, big band leaders like Tucker, Glenn Miller and others placed their original arrangements, and sometimes their singers, at the show’s disposal. Paul Whiteman and Henry Busse offered their services as guest conductors. Robert Shaw dropped by to coach the chorus.

In addition to an ever changing slate of employee headliners who sang, whistled or accordioned their way to fame each week, (9) a number of new “stars” emerged during the 1938/39 season. Among the most talented were soprano soloists Dorothy Anne Crow and Margaret Ellen Smith, tenor Arden White, and Regina Colbert who later teamed up with Harrison Frey, Paul Jones and Russell Howard to form the quartet “Jean and Her Boyfriends.” During the spring of 1939 the “Evans Sisters” — Betty Jane, Margaret June and Janet — joined the cast to replace the “Steele Sisters” who were invited on an extended tour with Horace Heidt and his “Brigadiers.”
Another 1938/39 addition was a 62-year-old payroll manager, named John Wincholl who was introduced to listeners as an "Old Timer of pure Scottish strain." Wincholl replaced Pat Patterson as master of ceremonies and before long "The Old Timer's" crisp burr became one of the most recognized voices in America.

"It's Wheeling Steel's" following on the Mutual network grew steadily as the months progressed. RADIO GUIDE noted that the show's network carriers had increased to 23 stations in October, 1938. TIME magazine placed the number at 27 nine months later. (10)

The TIME article was prompted by a momentous event in the early history of the show, a season finale performance broadcast live from the Court of Peace at the New York World's Fair on Sunday, June 25, 1939. Dedicated to West Virginia Statehood Day at the Fair which occurred on June 20th, the performance drew a record live audience of over 26,000. The cast was officially welcomed to the city by Mayor Fiorello La Guardia, and hailed as the Pride of the Mountain State by West Virginia Governor Homer A. Holt.

Several weeks later, in honor of the program's many triumphs, Wheeling Mayor John J. Mathison declared September 12, 1939, "It's Wheeling Steel Day" in Wheeling. According to one reporter, "the entire town turned out" to help fete the Steelmakers with parades, exhibitions and various awards honoring the recognition that they had brought to the city.

After two more seasons as one of the most successful programs on the Mutual network, "It's Wheeling Steel" jumped to the larger NBC Blue Network in October 1941. The show's carriers increased in number to over 50 stations and its audience swelled into the millions. Grimes' most ambitious predictions had come true. Company morale soared and Wheeling Steel had become "public pals" with America.

Ironically, however, just as the program's advertising potential approached its summit, the company's need to promote it's wares was virtually eliminated. On Sunday, December 7, 1941, "It's Wheeling Steel" was broadcast as usual from the Capitol Theatre in Wheeling. Only at the conclusion of the show did the cast and audience learn that the broadcast had been pre-empted nationally by news of the Japanese attack on Pearl Harbor.

For the next several years Wheeling Steel had an open contract with the United States Government to manufacture essential items for the war including steel mats for landing strips, fins and carrier bands for bombs and all manner of famous Wheeling Steel "Red Label" pails, tubs and garbage cans.

High level discussions within the company debated the future of "It's Wheeling Steel." Some executives favored cancellation or at least suspension of the program. Others, with a greater appreciation of the broad esteem that the company had gained through the show, felt an obligation to continue the program and to dedicate it to supporting the war effort.

The latter camp won, and for the next several years the Musical Steelmakers projected a patriotic image of productive workers contributing to the war effort "in steel and song." Company advertisements were suspended from the program and the "Old Timer" began to plug war bonds instead. The show went on tour, broadcasting live before crowds of servicemen, and performing special bond benefit programs.

A series of "Buy a Bomber" shows were nationally broadcast from selected West Virginia cities during the spring of 1943. Host communities were challenged to buy enough bonds to purchase a "medium bomber" at $175,000, or better yet, a "Flying Fortress" at $300,000. The planes would go into battle bearing the benefactor city's name. Programs in Parkersburg, Clarksburg, and Fairmont all handily exceeded their quarter of a million dollar goals. The final program of the series, broadcast live from the West Virginia University Field House in Morgantown, generated an amazing $663,000, an average of over $12 per county resident!

By mid-1943 "It's Wheeling Steel," had risen in popularity to fifth among all of the shows on the NBC lineup. In addition to airing over 84 American radio stations, the show was beamed overseas and into the trenches by short wave. Letters addressed to the "Old Timer" poured in from grateful servicemen around the globe. One G.I. pondered, "I wonder if all of you know how it made a lonesome man feel, somewhere out in the Pacific, when he heard the Steelmakers come over the air Sunday night?" Another writer, a Wheeling native, marvelled at the proliferation of Wheeling Steel products he encountered daily: "Can't get away from that old Red Label. They have several pails and G.I. cans right here in camp."
When I tell them that I’m from Wheeling they invariably say, ‘Oh yes, that’s where that radio program comes from.’"

When “It’s Wheeling Steel” entered its eighth season on September 26, 1943, over a 97 member station network, the show was at the height of its popularity. The eighth season, however, was to be it’s last. Surviving cast members offer varying analyses of the chain of events which caused the show to fold, but all agree that a major factor was the decline in health of John Grimes, the creator, artistic director and driving force behind the show. The final program, the 326th “original family broadcast,” aired on June 18th, 1944.

As critics were fond of pointing out throughout the duration of the show, “It’s Wheeling Steel” was a “pioneering experiment,” not only in corporate relations and industrial advertising but in commercial broadcasting and popular music programming as well. Though no thorough study of the show’s legacy has been conducted to date, it is likely that the program had enduring influences upon all of these conventions.

In fact, a considerable number of Musical Steelmakers went on to significant careers in music and broadcasting. Arranger and conductor Lew Davies found employment writing arrangements for Perry Como’s “Chesterfield Hour” which was broadcast live from New York’s famous Chesterfield Club. When the club closed Davies was hired by bandleader and recording industry mogul Enoch Light to help launch Command Records, the first high quality stereo record label to hit the market. Davies wrote arrangements for Command stars Tony Mattola, Doc Severinon and many others. During the early-1950s Lawrence Welk asked Davies to assist him in developing a music variety program for television. Steel show alumni contend that the Welk show’s program format and “family” orientation were directly descended from “It’s Wheeling Steel.”

Many more Steelmakers found positions with big bands and symphony orchestras. Drummer Eddie Johnston joined the Henry Busse band. Tenor saxophonist John Olszowy signed on with Tommy Tucker. Ernie Mauro played lead alto sax for Benny Goodman. Trombonist Mal Stevens performed successively with Ted Fiorito, Franky Masters and Fred Waring. Violinist Earl Summers formed a band of his own (which included several former Steelmakers) and later held first violin and concertmaster chairs with several of the region’s leading symphonic orchestras including the Wheeling and Columbus Symphonies and the Pittsburgh Ballet and Light Opera.

Other cast members had relatively brief but significant engagements which transcended the show. As noted above, the Steele Sisters went on an extended tour with Horace Heidt and his “Brigadiers” in 1938. Regina and Sarah Rehm made brief appearances on network programs, based in New York and Chicago, respectively. Child star Carolyn Lee went to Hollywood and starred in a movie with Fred MacMurray and Madeline Carroll.

Further study will be necessary before we can begin to weigh the history. In the meantime, we must rely upon the testimonies of contemporary critics and broadcasters like radio pioneer George W. Smith who once wrote:

“Accepted chain commercial broadcasting practice was upset . . . and industrial advertising history was made . . . when men of steel became men of entertainment for 30-minutes each Sunday afternoon.”

(12)

John A. Cuthbert
Curator

NOTES
1. The group included several musicians who were veterans of the earlier “stogie show.”
2. NEW YORK TIMES, Sunday, March 15, 1942.
3. The program was broadcast from the WWVA studio for only the first year. In search of a larger facility, with better acoustics and a live audience, the show moved first to the Scottish Rite Cathedral and later to the Market Auditorium, before finding a permanent home at the Capitol Theatre in 1939.
4. A harpist recruited in Iowa received a position in the advertising department along with her invitation to join the show as did the program’s second “singing stenographer,” Regina Colbert, who joined the show in 1938.
5. Family connections aside, most orchestra members were unionized professionals. According to TIME magazine (July 3, 1939), each musician received a weekly salary of $38 in 1939. The salary rose eventually to $65. All other performers were considered amateurs though they did receive modest payment for their participation. Employee headliners like the “Singing Millmen” generally received $10-$20 per week over their regular wage, with no time off for rehearsals. Family amateurs like the “Steele Sisters” received approximately $5-$10 per broadcast. The result was a most economical program. TIME while other half hour musical network shows cost as much as $15,000 per week, “It’s Wheeling Steel” ran about $3,500, $2,500 of which was spent on purchasing air time.
6. Lucille Bell, Kathleen Nelson and Lois Mae Noite, later joined by Harriet Drake.
THE "IT’S WHEELING STEEL" RECORDINGS

When "It’s Wheeling Steel" was discontinued in 1944 an extensive series of transcription disk recordings of program rehearsals and broadcasts was placed in storage in a company warehouse. In the ensuing decades the location and even the existence of this collection was gradually forgotten by all but a few former cast members.

Due primarily to the efforts of ex-performers Baird Kloss and Harrison Frey, and Mr. Frey’s son James Frey, and with the assistance of John Sneddon, Manager for Operations of Wheeling-Pittsburgh Steel, the recordings were donated to West Virginia University in 1991.

Upon initial examination, University curators discovered that time and nature have taken their toll on the fragile recordings which appear to be acetate emulsion recordings on glass and aluminum cores.

Two types of problems are primarily evident: problems with the core which supports the recording, and problems with the emulsion into which the recording is engraved. Core problems include both warping, cracking, and in a few cases, breakage. Emulsion problems which are generally more prevalent include flaking or crazing of the emulsion both presumably resulting from a loss of adherence to the core. All of the recordings are in need of cleaning.

Thus, an extensive job lays ahead for West Virginia Collection staff who are currently planning to not only preserve but also to disseminate this fascinating episode in West Virginia’s colorful history.

7. Walter Schane and William Griffiths of the Musketeers, along with weighmaster Will Stevenson and scale repairman Frank Nalepa.
8. LIFE, IV, 12, (March 21, 1938), 22-25.
9. According to an article in the NEW YORK TIMES (March 15, 1942), well over 1,000 performers appeared on the program during its eight season duration, and nearly 3,000 candidates auditioned annually.
10. TIME, XXXIV, 1, (July 3, 1939), 46.
11. "A Honeymoon in Bali," Paramount Pictures, 1938. The daughter of a company ceramics designer, Caroline Lee was actually discovered by a Hollywood producer in a Wheeling hotel. She did not appear on "It’s Wheeling Steel" until after her return from filming "A Honeymoon in Bali."

REGIONAL HISTORY ASSOCIATION NEWS

West Virginia Day Celebration to Feature Presidential Forum.

One hundred and twenty-five years ago, by act of the West Virginia State Legislature, and with funds provided by the Morrill Land-Grant College Act, the Agricultural College of West Virginia was established in Morgantown. The College was soon afterwards renamed West Virginia University in order to more accurately reflect the institution’s comprehensive goals.

In the ensuing century and a quarter, West Virginia University has continually endeavored to bring quality, leadership and stability to higher education in West Virginia despite a constantly changing political, economic and social climate. Its struggles and triumphs form a unique history which more than one historian has urged today’s leaders to consult in mapping out West Virginia’s future.

In honor of the University’s 125th birthday, the 6th annual West Virginia Day Celebration will be dedicated to exploring West Virginia University history. In addition to the customary exhibit, birthday party and children’s activities in the Mountainlair, this year’s forum promises to be an especially noteworthy event. The forum’s panel of speakers will be comprised entirely of West Virginia University presidents, ranging from Dr. Elvis Stahr, who left the University in 1961 to accept an appointment as Secretary of the Army in the Kennedy administration, to WVU’s current leader, Dr. Neil S. Bucklew. As West Virginia Day (June 20) falls on a Saturday this year, the University’s celebration will occur on Friday, June 19th. We hope to see you there!

Capital Campaign Report

As most Regional History Association members are aware, West Virginia University is currently in the midst of a capital campaign. This campaign is of profound im-
portance to WVU’s future. In this age of economic instability tax dollars currently meet less than 50% of the University’s budget needs. Thus, private support directly impacts the quality of the University and its many programs, including the West Virginia and Regional History Collection. Fortunately, WVU is blessed with a community of strong supporters and already over three-fourths of the campaign’s 102 million dollar goal has been achieved.

In renewing memberships for 1992, members are asked to take a moment to ponder their interest and commitment to the Regional History Collection and its mission. Like the University at large, the Collection counts heavily upon private funds to support opportunities which would otherwise be lost. Private funds recently enabled the acquisition of a group of Pearl Buck Papers, financed the rescue and transportation of Civil War, genealogy and art collections to Colson Hall, and paid a student assistant to index sound recordings in the Patrick Gainer Collection. Members and other readers who value this important work are urged to consider a special gift to the Regional History Collection during this important year. In addition to benefiting the Collection directly your gift will also help West Virginia University reach its campaign goal!

HERE’S HOW YOU CAN HELP

Regional History Association members may wish to consider a planned gift to the Collection. Planned giving opportunities include: Charitable Bequests; Charitable Remainder Trusts; Charitable Gift Annuities; and Gifts of Real Estate and Life Insurance. One of these options will be discussed in each of the next several Newsletters.

A Charitable Bequest

Every year a number of alumni and other friends of West Virginia University designate a portion of their assets to benefit the University. Gifts by Wills (bequests) enable people to make significant contributions that might not have been possible during their lifetimes.

Charitable bequests can be accomplished in various ways:

A specific bequest of a fixed amount is the most common type of bequest. It can be changed over the years as circumstances change.

A percentage bequest is the most flexible. The bequest is expressed as a percentage of the estate. The amount of the gift changes in proportion to the changes in the assets of the estate.

A residual bequest conveys to the remaining (or residual) beneficiary all assets that remain after all debts, taxes, expenses, and other bequests have been satisfied.

A contingent bequest takes effect only if the primary intention of the bequest cannot be met.

Any gift by bequest may be restricted to a specific purpose.

For more information about charitable bequests, write to:

Director of Planned Giving, West Virginia University Foundation, Inc. P. O. Box 4533, Morgantown, WV 26504-4533 or call (304) 598-2700.

SELECTED ACCESSIONS LIST


Additional articles, speeches, plays, and fictional writings by the famous West Virginia-born author. The addendum also includes book and movie reviews and writings of other authors from Buck's collection.


Microfilm edition of Ohio Historical Society's holdings of John Brown papers. The collection largely consists of the John Brown papers which West Virginian Boyd B. Stutler collected, but also includes papers of John Brown, Jr. The letters, documents, letterbooks, manuscripts, and articles detail the Brown family's business relationships and abolitionist activities, particularly those in Kansas and Harpers Ferry.


A collection of photographs depicting Civilian Conservation Corps activities in Monongalia and Preston counties. Included are scenes from Civilian Conservation Corps camps near Kingwood and Morgantown, and work at Coopers Rock State Forest.


Microfilm of John W. Davis Papers at Yale University Library. The papers include letters from many of the most prominent political, diplomatic, and judicial leaders of the era, including three presidents, but also demonstrate Davis's strong, life-long ties to West Virginia.


General and Sunday School minute books for the historic Morgantown church containing historical, financial, membership, and statistical information about the church and its relationship to the community and other Baptist churches. The volumes provide insight into the evolution of the church from its rural beginnings in 1842 to its role as an urban church which offered outreach and missionary programs to immigrants and industrial workers in the Morgantown area.

A collection of company photographs from the Pocahontas Operators' Association, based in Bluefield, West Virginia, depicting mines, miners, and towns in the Flat Top-Pocahontas Coal Field of West Virginia and Virginia. Scenes include interior and exterior views of mines of member companies of the association and company towns in McDowell, Mercer, Raleigh, and Wyoming counties as well as photos of working miners and machinery recording the changing methods of mining during the era of mechanization in the coal industry.


Microfilm edition of postmaster appointment lists in the Post Office Department records in the National Archives. The records list each post office in the nation in alphabetical order along with their masters. These lists provide important historical, genealogical and geographical information, and are a companion to the West Virginia Postmasters collection, A&M 3026.


Minutes, reports, publications, and the constitution of the West Virginia Historical Association. Professional historians founded the organization in 1959 as an offshoot of the West Virginia Historical Society. Through its history the association engaged in such activities as lobbying the Legislature for greater representation of professional historians on state historical commissions, the raising of teaching standards for high school history, and the designation of history as a separate discipline in the state's high schools. The organization also promoted historical research and writing through presentations at its annual meetings and the publication of a journal. Included in the collection is a typescript history by the late William D. Barns, past president and charter member of the association.


Papers of John D. Winebrenner, a regional director for the United Mine Workers of America Health and Retirement Fund in Tennessee. The papers provide insight into the history of the Fund and supplement the archives of the United Mine Workers of America Health and Retirement Funds at the West Virginia Collection.

West Virginia and Regional History Collection Newsletter
Colson Hall, Morgantown, WV 26506

Coal miners at work in the Pocahontas coal fields, ca. 1910.

The Steelmakers Orchestra looks on as Wheeling Steel receives the Army-Navy "E" award for production.