
WISCONSIN ON THE AIR

*100 Years of Public Broadcasting
in the State That Invented It*

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INTRODUCTION

The Wisconsin Idea

On a dreary December afternoon in 1978, I heard a commotion outside my WHA radio manager's office. "I am looking for Jack Mitchell!" a voice shouted, and a reporter and a photographer from Madison's *Capital Times* newspaper burst through the door. In full Mike Wallace "gotcha" mode, they began barking questions and snapping pictures. My answers and a lot more turned up in a multistory, page-one exposé with the title, "The Selling of WHA: Some Fear Loss of Quality."¹ The second and third stories appeared the next day with the headline, "The Selling of WHA: Is the Wisconsin Idea Dead?"²

The stories did include the legitimate news that on January 1, 1979, Madison stations WHA, an AM station, and WERN, an FM station, would begin to have separate program schedules and to provide complementary programming under the generic identity Wisconsin Public Radio. The two stations were presenting virtually identical programming, a mix of music and talk, but as Wisconsin Public Radio, WHA would specialize in news and informational programming while WERN would emphasize classical music and cultural material. Between the two stations, Wisconsin Public Radio would provide more hours of each type of programming, giving listeners choices throughout the day. I viewed the change as purely positive, a win-win for both music and news listeners, but some saw it as sinister. The reporter opined, "The quality of the expanded programming is less important to its architects than is the size of the audience it is supposed to attract."³

While the introduction of dual service was the real news, the *Capital Times* articles dissected what I had done since I had taken over as head of WHA two years earlier, in late 1976. The articles quoted an unnamed university official—I suspected the president of the UW system—complaining that he did not want to hear about abortion with his breakfast. Emeritus political science professor David Fellman, a frequent and popular speaker

on WHA and WERN, told the reporter, "I think the new people who took over a few years ago regarded the station as stodgy and old-fashioned, and it seems to me more and more they've been aping commercial radio."⁴ In a sense, Fellman was right. Public radio was adapting, as commercial radio had, to the way listeners were using the medium in the television age. When television replaced radio as the dominant broadcast medium, radio became a background companion to routine activities such as driving, washing dishes, or brushing teeth. Listening patterns followed the comings and goings of daily life more than a station's program schedule. The media environment had changed, and I was trying to adapt WHA and WERN to those changes. The adaptations I instituted, however, did not signify a change in purpose. Rather than euthanize the Wisconsin Idea, as the newspaper articles suggested, I meant to resuscitate it.

The skeptics were correct to worry, however, for the Wisconsin Idea provided the central rationale for university- and state-supported broadcasting. The radical concept that the university should serve all residents of the state, not just students on campus, animated the campus as educational radio emerged from the University of Wisconsin physics department in 1917. The Wisconsin Idea envisioned the university as an instrument of democratic change. It sought to pluck the university from its ivory tower and have it grapple with the real problems of ordinary people where they lived and worked. University of Wisconsin president Charles Van Hise and his close friend, Governor—and later Senator—"Fighting" Bob La Follette championed the Wisconsin Idea, but it was Professor Charles McCarthy, a scrappy, 127-pound football All-American from Brown University and a son of poor Irish immigrants, who defined it and explained it to the nation in his 1912 book, *The Wisconsin Idea*, with an introduction by Theodore Roosevelt.⁵

The Wisconsin Idea describes a full array of progressive reforms undertaken in the state early in the twentieth century. The Wisconsin Idea, McCarthy wrote, responded to the concentration of wealth and power in the hands of a few at the expense of the middle class. McCarthy explained, "Our civilization, with its wealth and prosperity, must be made to exist for its true purposes—the betterment, the efficiency and the welfare of each individual."⁶ Capitalism inevitably produced a small number of big winners who used their wealth and power to cement their privileged posi-

tion at the expense of everyone else. They exercised economic power over consumers and smaller businesses. They exploited their workers. They exercised political power by buying politicians to do their bidding. They owned judges. McCarthy foresaw the day when a small group of powerful families owned most of the wealth and the rest of the population drifted into poverty. The Wisconsin Idea sought to empower the middle class in a struggle against the rich and powerful. Education and political reform would help individuals prosper and grow to their full potential.

Professor McCarthy headed the Legislative Reference Bureau. Under its auspices and with the help of fellow UW faculty members, he drafted legislation to right the balance of power. Some legislation attacked concentrated economic power through laws regulating business, establishing workers' compensation, protecting the environment, and limiting child labor. It enacted a state income tax. Other laws addressed political corruption by establishing a professional civil service system. Some legislation gave power directly to the people through primary elections, the direct



Professor Charles McCarthy with staff at the Legislative Reference Library. McCarthy published *The Wisconsin Idea* in 1912. IMAGE COURTESY OF THE UW-MADISON ARCHIVES, #S06554

election of US senators, and the ability to recall elected officials. Theodore Roosevelt's introduction described Wisconsin as "literally a laboratory for wise experimental legislation aiming to secure the social and political betterment of the people as a whole."⁷

McCarthy said he sought to empower the individual—"the man," in his phrase. "Why not invest something in the farmer and the mechanic so that he will become more efficient, so that he will have a better home, better prospects, and greater skills?" he asked. "Why not teach him how to live so that he may be strong and vigorous; why not show him his rights under the law?"⁸ Education was the answer to these questions, and so the university landed at the center of the Wisconsin Idea. An activist university could help empower common people to thrive in a system McCarthy saw as stacked against them. Shortly after assuming the presidency of the University of Wisconsin in 1903, Van Hise made this philosophy clear: "I shall never be content until the beneficent influence of the University reaches every home in the state."⁹

McCarthy's chapter on education praised the university's work in agricultural extension, which, he said, created the state's dairy industry. Agricultural extension was not unique to Wisconsin—all land-grant institutions engaged in it—but the university in Madison embraced it more vigorously and more effectively than any other institution in the country. The university's unique General Extension division, which McCarthy had helped organize in 1906, had even more potential for good than the agricultural extension because it sought to implement a broader concept of mass education. McCarthy charged the new division with three tasks: facilitating fair and impartial debate on important issues, offering courses by correspondence, and organizing public lectures.¹⁰ The university gave the division its own faculty dedicated to enriching everyone in the state. Ninety-eight professors and other faculty "of the highest rank" went to factories, towns, and villages to teach classes. They supervised more than five thousand students taking correspondence courses.¹¹ They also promoted grassroots democracy, engaging broad swaths of the public on issues previously dealt with quietly by elites, special interests, and, too often, corrupt politicians. McCarthy reported that General Extension's Department of Debating and Public Discussion lent eighty thousand articles on public issues to individuals and groups throughout the state.¹² He argued that



University president Charles Van Hise,
champion of the Wisconsin Idea.
WHI IMAGE ID 33714

General Extension's activities, supported by public money, not private, would ensure free speech in the discussion of public issues.

McCarthy concluded *The Wisconsin Idea* by reiterating the theme of helping people help themselves, which, he emphasized, differs from socialism. Rather than adopt socialist remedies, he urged the nation to follow Wisconsin's example of neutralizing privilege through education along with economic and political reforms. He told the nation to use "hope and encouragement" to "make every man more efficient so that the door of opportunity may always be open before him."¹³ He asked businesspeople to act in their enlightened self-interest by supporting state investment in "hope, health, happiness, and justice."¹⁴ The Wisconsin Idea was a model for progressive people everywhere.

While *The Wisconsin Idea* included chapters on education, political reforms, control of business abuses, and social justice, the book did not touch another theme in the progressive reform movement, the role of print media such as magazines and newspapers. Media could reinforce the power of wealth, or they could support the more democratic values of the reformers. Yellow journalist William Randolph Hearst and his

fellow newspaper barons across the country were as much members of the wealthy elite as the industrialists, bankers, or railroad tycoons. The application of steam power to the printing press and the concentration of the population into large cities provided newspapers the opportunity to build circulation and profit. To make the most of that opportunity, newspapers needed to attract mass audiences who responded to topics less elevated—less serious—than the academically based reformers thought they should. Sex, crime, and violence attracted audiences to newspapers in the early twentieth century just as reliably as they draw audiences to mass entertainment today. The progressives saw two interconnected problems with the press of the day. Newspapers built readership with content that did nothing to create an informed and involved citizenry necessary for a real democracy. Their owners then used their power to protect their own privileged positions and those of their advertisers.

In the summer of 1912, the same year Charles McCarthy published *The Wisconsin Idea*, University of Wisconsin president Van Hise invited a hundred newspaper editors and critics to the Madison campus. He asked them to address the problem of "Commercialism and Journalism."¹⁵ For three days they described the problems that profit-driven newspapers created and their possible solutions. All proposed solutions centered on non-commercial, not-for-profit newspapers operated by local governments, foundations, or public universities. Universities were deemed particularly appropriate since they were already in the business of research (investigation), teaching (reporting), and public service, and were protected under the umbrella of academic freedom. Hamilton Holt, editor of the *Independent*, a progressive magazine, had campaigned for an alternative to commercial journalism for a decade and brought his message to the Madison conference. "The ordinary commercial press," he told the delegates, could not provide the information needed for citizens to make informed opinions on the issues of the day. Nor, he said, could such papers "provide competent discussion of pending issues from different points of view."¹⁶ He concluded that commercial journalism could never fill these vital functions for democracy because "it does not PAY to be as thorough and impartial as the ideal paper should be. A self-supporting journal must be sensational. It must give undue prominence to spectacular events and crowd out quieter but more important moments."¹⁷

On an August day in 1912, Holt's oratory reverberated in the auditorium of Music Hall, a small chapel-like building on the south side of the green lawn that sweeps up Bascom Hill in the center of the UW campus. Across from Music Hall on the north side of that lawn stands Science Hall, a hulking Romanesque Revival, where physics professor Earle Terry had toiled since 1910 with his graduate students to build a functioning wireless transmitting device. It took five more years after the newspaper conference and the publication of *The Wisconsin Idea* for Professor Terry and his students to demonstrate the possibilities of "broadcasting," a technology that had the potential to make real the hopes of McCarthy, Van Hise, and Holt.

By the time Terry's radio station broadcast on a reasonably regular schedule, however, the Progressive movement of Theodore Roosevelt, Woodrow Wilson, and Bob La Follette had lost its luster nationally and dimmed even in the home state of the Wisconsin Idea. The horrors of World War I drained the Progressive movement of its optimistic vision of a more rational and democratic society. The Progressive political agenda of McCarthy and La Follette gave way to the business-focused "Roaring Twenties." President Calvin Coolidge spoke for the majority of Americans when he told a convention of newspaper editors in 1925, "The chief business of the American people is business."¹⁸ And business would grab the new technology of radio for its own profit-oriented purposes.

An attenuated Wisconsin Idea continued, however, in the University of Wisconsin, and even in Wisconsin state government. University experts stood ready to assist state government in crafting legislation as McCarthy had done, but state leaders did not necessarily seek or accept the help as readily as they had before the Great War. The university continued to help individuals improve their skills, widen their horizons, advance their careers, and participate more effectively in a democratic political system, but without reference to fighting entrenched power. This newly refined Wisconsin Idea claimed "the boundaries of the university are the boundaries of the state."¹⁹ This concept shaped the thinking of radio pioneers Professors Earle Terry, William Lighty, Andrew Hopkins, and Henry Ewbank in the 1920s. As the first electronic mass medium, radio provided a perfect vehicle to carry the university to the boundaries of the state. It offered a liberal education (Lighty), provided useful information

(Hopkins), and fostered democracy (Ewbank). As America turned broadcasting over to commercial private enterprise, Wisconsin created a unique tax-supported broadcasting system dedicated to the public interest rather than to private profit.

Wisconsin on the Air explains how, over one hundred years, the goals of these progressive thinkers grew into today's Wisconsin Public Radio and Wisconsin Public Television. There were certainly growing pains. As director of Wisconsin Public Radio for more than twenty years, I experienced some in the 1970s, 1980s, and 1990s, but those I experienced were not as severe as those that other leaders of noncommercial radio and television endured as they sought to nurture their alternative to profit-seeking media in Wisconsin. Through one hundred years, these leaders adapted their broadcasting to a changing environment, but they never lost the genetic imprint of the Wisconsin Idea.

PART 1

EDUCATIONAL BROADCASTING

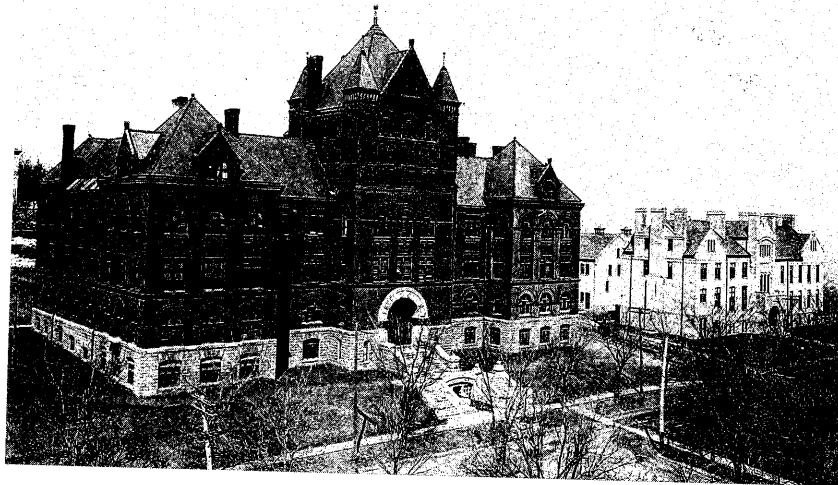
1917-1967

EDUCATION LEARNS TO SING

1917-1929

No one knows the exact date, but it happened during the first three months of 1917. Physics department assistant professor Earle Terry and his wife, Sadie, invited a group of faculty, deans, and friends to their home to hear the "first broadcast" of the University of Wisconsin radio station. For several years, Professor Terry and his students had been transmitting the dots and dashes of Morse code. Only the geeks of the day who shared their interest in radio technology could decipher it, but this night would open the transmission to all who listened. In Terry's Science Hall lab, graduate student Malcolm Hanson had rigged a telephone mouthpiece to capture the sound from the horn of a phonograph.¹ When his guests gathered, Terry called Hanson and said, "We are all ready." Hanson flipped the necessary switches to excite the wire strung between the top of Science Hall and the chimney of the old university heating plant behind it. He placed the phonograph needle on a record, and a receiver in Terry's living room began to emit the faint sound of a piano playing "Narcissus," a popular tune of the day.² The guests were underwhelmed. Years later, one of them said that she liked to think that all the guests "were as dumb about the whole thing as I was."³ Not a single guest realized that one hundred years of broadcasting from the University of Wisconsin had just begun.

The lack of enthusiasm in the Terry living room that night matched the lack of enthusiasm in the professor's academic home, the physics department. Pioneer broadcaster Edgar "Pop" Gordon dubbed the department's attitude "scornful."⁴ The physics faculty prided themselves on



Science Hall, where Earle Terry and his students built 9XM. The Chemical Laboratory (600 N. Park) to the right provided the first home for WHA-TV in 1954. WHI IMAGE ID 58314

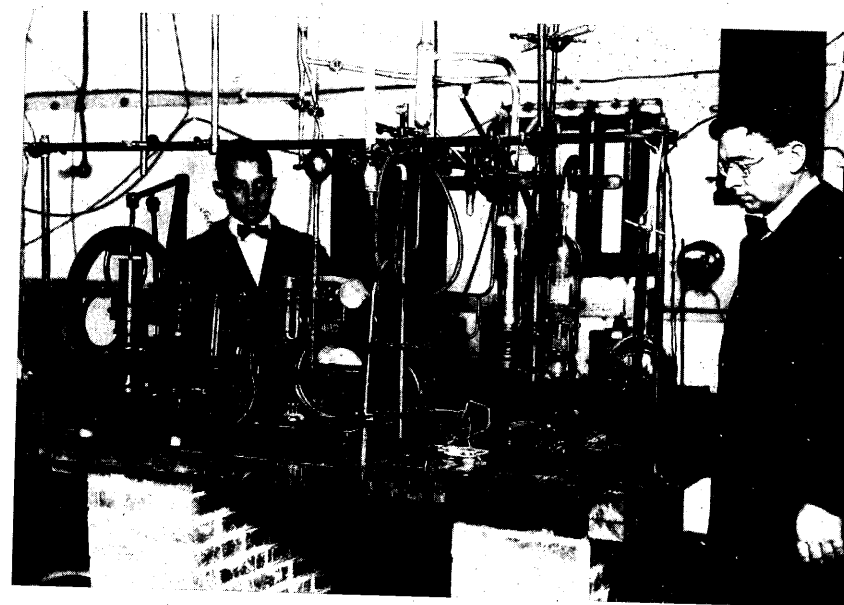
the theoretical nature of their work and looked down on the “engineers,” who sought practical applications for their theories. Using radio gear to reach a broad audience had little to do with the physics of radio waves, and Terry’s colleagues punished his devotion to this peripheral activity. They objected to the time he wasted on radio and to the noise his radio transmitter poured into the offices, labs, and classrooms of Science Hall and later Sterling Hall. Inflicting the ultimate academic slight, the physics department did not promote him to associate professor until he had served almost twenty years as an assistant professor. As one graduate student observed, the physics department tolerated but never supported him.⁵

The only other professor who shared Terry’s interest in radio and with whom he collaborated was, in fact, an engineer. In 1914, engineering professor Edward Bennett received a license from the federal government for experimental station 9XM, but he soon turned the project over to Terry, whose passion for the enterprise exceeded his own. Explained Bennett, “Professor Terry’s vision extended beyond the stage of experimentation with physical principles and properties. When telephonic transmission [voice and music rather than dots and dashes] became a possibility, Professor Terry grasped the significance of radio broadcasting for the Extension work of the University.”⁶ The Wisconsin Idea, extending the boundaries of

the university to the boundaries of the state, drove Terry to push beyond Morse code and make broadcasts accessible to anyone with a receiver.

Transmission of voice and music required glass vacuum tubes, which were not yet manufactured commercially. The only way to get them was to blow molten glass into the shape needed, install the required electronics, and then remove the air from the tube to create a vacuum. The process presented many opportunities for failure, but Terry mastered the techniques and taught them to his students. After two years of experimenting, they produced tubes that worked well enough to transmit the feeble sound that the guests in Terry’s living room could barely hear that winter night in 1917.⁷ Because tubes blew up frequently and sometimes dramatically, students needed to continuously produce replacements. They became so skillful that they supplied tubes to other fledgling broadcasters.

Partisans of the University of Wisconsin’s pioneering efforts in radio have proclaimed 9XM (later WHA) “the oldest station in the nation.” This boast headlines the historical marker affixed to Vilas Hall, which now houses public broadcasting on campus. In reality, no broadcast pioneer can identify precisely when a station began. Each station developed



Professor Earle Terry, right, with chief radio operator Malcolm Hanson, ca. 1920. IMAGE COURTESY OF THE UW-MADISON ARCHIVES, #S06927

incrementally, starting with point-to-point messages in Morse code, eventually adding voice and music, inviting people to listen to these "broadcasts," and, ultimately, producing a full schedule of broadcasts aimed at a broad audience. Wisconsin followed that progression. It was not until four years after 1917's "first broadcast" that 9XM announced a limited broadcast schedule. It took ten more years to produce a full and reliable schedule.

Relicensed as WHA in 1922, 9XM's significance in broadcast history has less to do with being first to broadcast than with being first to implement a public service philosophy of broadcasting. The two great progressive leaders, Professor Charles McCarthy and President Charles Van Hise, died before WHA replaced 9XM, but their Wisconsin Idea dominated the campus when Professor Terry started his work in 1910. Terry embraced the ideal of the university as an empowering force for all state residents. Unlike the engineers, physicists, and tinkerers who developed radio technology at other universities early in the twentieth century, Terry cared about the content his transmitter would broadcast. Terry understood that the real potential for radio was less about point-to-point communication (such as ship to shore) and more about reaching many people simultaneously, in "broadcasting." He conceived of radio as a mass medium with receivers "more common than bathtubs in Wisconsin homes."⁸ Terry envisioned radio's power to do good, to educate, to inform, and to inspire large numbers of people simultaneously. The first program director at 9XM, Professor William Lighty, wrote that Terry and Hanson, "who approached the problems . . . from the technical side, also had the uncommon insight into its social possibilities."⁹ Others gave similar descriptions of Terry's social vision. Only such vision explains the many hours he and his graduate students devoted to the radio station. They far exceeded their commitment to the physics department and received little acknowledgment or reward for their efforts.

Terry accepted the appointment as the first manager of 9XM, a part-time assignment, in addition to his other professorial duties. With no budgeted staff, he needed to enlist the services of other faculty and graduate students to operate and program the station. He found conspirators in Andrew "Andy" Hopkins of the Agriculture College and William Lighty, head of correspondence study for General Extension. Both came to the university from adult education backgrounds. They had worked to "Ameri-

canize" the wave of immigrants who flooded cities early in the twentieth century. Ensnared at the University of Wisconsin, each would continue his commitment to adult education by using radio.

Hopkins had performed his adult education work for the YMCA in Milwaukee, where he taught English and vocational skills to the city's mostly German immigrants.¹⁰ Hopkins moved to Madison when the College of Agriculture hired him to disseminate to the general public information about advancements in agriculture and home economics. Before radio broadcasting emerged as a useful technology, he "broadcast" useful information via available print media. When the Agriculture College created a Department of Agricultural Journalism to take over this function and to train students for media careers serving rural audiences, Hopkins became its chair and visionary leader. Like his peers in some other mid-western universities, Hopkins saw radio as a better way to do what he was already doing in print. It was a perfect means of reaching the 190,000 small (seventy-acre or less) farms scattered throughout the state, particularly when the literacy rate among state farmers was only 60 percent.¹¹ Even those who could not read English could understand it when they heard it on the radio. The station's earliest transmissions in Morse code, and then voice, consisted of weather reports around the noon hour so that farmers could listen during their midday dinners. Market reports from the state department of agriculture followed the weather. Adding news from Hopkins's agricultural journalism department created something like a noontime "farm" program.

While Hopkins served on the university's radio committee for decades and his agricultural journalism department made the largest commitment to programming for 9XM/WHA, General Extension's Professor Lighty threw more of his heart and soul into educational radio than anyone other than Terry himself. Indeed, Lighty resembled Terry. Each was an inner-directed individual, true to his own vision, indifferent to what others thought. While beloved by many, neither man fit the conventional academic model nor played academic politics very well. Lighty had spent a decade working for the St. Louis Ethical Movement, which educated and organized workingmen. He said he sought to motivate working people who had been "uninterested in exercising—or lacked the skills to exercise—influence to address their own problems."¹² His ten-year

commitment to that challenging task in St. Louis drove him to a state of "nervous exhaustion." Lighty and his family fled St. Louis and retreated to peaceful northern Wisconsin. Charles McCarthy found him there in 1906 and recruited him to help organize President Van Hise's new General Extension division.

Lighty accepted McCarthy's invitation, although he worried that McCarthy's vision of empowerment tended toward practical and vocational skills while he favored history, literature, and cultural enrichment. Lighty cited the Chautauqua circuit as his model.¹³ The Chautauqua tent shows traveled among rural communities, bringing musical and dramatic presentations and lectures that sought to inform, entertain, and inspire. They brought to rural residents some of the cultural opportunities available to those who lived in urban areas. Radio, wrote Lighty, should function as a primary socializing agent that would aid in "the rationalizing of all citizens."¹⁴ He did not support broadcasting full courses on the radio. Rather, he saw radio's positive contribution to society more broadly, "to secure broadcasts that have a general human interest appeal for the vast invisible audience, and at the same time to interpret the true spirit, the life and the work of the university, as well as to instruct, stimulate, and enrich the lives of listeners."¹⁵

Lighty's General Extension colleague, Lilia Bascom, said he was interested in bringing cultural programs to the people of the state, "for example, good music, not jazz; talks on political questions; lectures and university events."¹⁶ Good music meant classical music to Lighty. A very traditional man, he sought to raise the cultural standards of those less fortunate in their tastes than he. Not surprisingly, his attempt to elevate tastes was not always appreciated by those whose tastes he targeted for elevating. In 1925, Professor Terry received a request from listener C. H. Alzmeyer: "Give me something with a melody and you will git [sic] the applause." He suggested songs such as "Carry Me Back to Old Verginia [sic]." He wanted fiddle tunes. "Fiddle don't mean a VIOLIN," he clarified.¹⁷ Terry's response might have been written by Lighty. "Having been brought up on a farm myself, I think I understand quite well the character of the programs you would most enjoy." But WHA, he said, broadcast only material of merit. "The air is overcrowded every night with jazz and other worthless material, and it would be quite beneath the dignity of the university to add to it."¹⁸

He closed with the emphatic promise that WHA would never broadcast "old time fiddle music."

The radio station benefited from Professor Lighty's unrestrained, and generally uncritical, enthusiasm for all forms of adult education. According to his colleague Andy Hopkins, Lighty was never critical of others, and no one was ever critical of him. Amused perhaps, but not critical: "He incited the best in others."¹⁹ While his colleagues may have snickered at his formality and eccentricities, such as riding a horse to work as they passed him in their automobiles, they seem to have liked and respected him. Yes, he was neurotic, but no one denied his idealism. Hopkins described him as a very kind man: "He loved people. . . . He wanted to improve society. I think it was his impelling motive in all his educational work."²⁰

Lighty tried to entice as many faculty members as possible from all university departments to prepare "talks" for the radio station. He asked faculty experts to write the talks, just as they might write short articles for publication in print. They could read the talks themselves or Lighty could read them on the air. Recollections differ on Lighty's success in attracting the biggest names on campus. Lighty boasted of one big catch after another. In 1924, he bragged that three hundred faculty or staff members had appeared on the station that year.²¹ Others said most faculty regarded radio as a plaything "beneath the dignity of a true educator."²² The chairman of the economics department put his department's refusal diplomatically, saying, "There seems to be an oversupply of modesty, though I urged them all to volunteer."²³ Perhaps expressing such modesty, the assistant head of the university library did not find the library particularly interesting: "This leads me to feel that a twelve-minute broadcast on the 'History of the University Library' would be a flop. Lord knows there has been too much broadcasting on uninteresting subjects and I do not care to add to the number."²⁴ A few years later, an economics professor declined because he used charts in his presentations, saying, "In their absence, I fear that my series will be rather sketchy."²⁵

Perhaps faculty feared having the same experience as Charles E. Brown of the State Historical Society. He reported delivering his talk in a "telephone booth" draped with heavy curtains. The booth, he said, had "no air, no sound, and no hope for him who entered there."²⁶ He described lights that flashed directives such as "begin," "faster," "slower," "one minute,"

and "end." The lights so distracted him from his script that he was unsure whether he had read intelligently or "mumbled it to an unseen friend or foe." He concluded, "Weak with nervous exhaustion and heavy perspiration, I stepped limply from the ordeal, hoping that never again would I be called upon to participate in this strange new field of broadcasting."²⁷

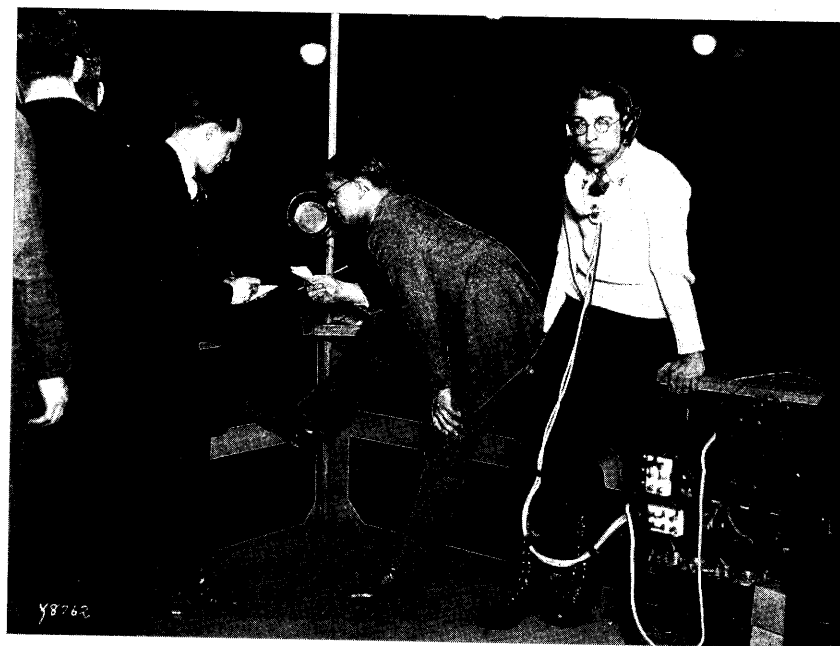
At a faculty meeting, the chair of Professor Terry's own physics department opposed faculty participation because radio had "no experimental significance."²⁸ Another scientist responded that radio "had significance as a social experiment."²⁹ University president Edward Birge provided no support to Lighty's efforts. In fact, the president insisted on receiving copies of all faculty talks five days before broadcast to establish, he said, a written record in case he received complaints. There is no indication that the president censored the talks submitted to his office, but he approached the radio experiment more with caution than enthusiasm.

Other than agricultural journalism, only one academic unit provided consistent support for Lighty's programming. His home unit, the General Extension division, paid part of the salary of a faculty member in the Department of Music, and Lighty tapped that resource for the radio station and created its first "star." Edgar "Pop" Gordon provided talks before live music performances early in the development of 9XM, including a concert by Pablo Casals. In 1922, he conducted an evening music appreciation course ungracefully titled, "The University Extension Instruction Service by Radio Broadcast on the Appreciation of Music."³⁰ He talked about music, played music, and sometimes asked listeners to sing along. Wrote one listener, "Put me down as one of the participants in the Radio Chorus singing *America* last night. As I was alone in the house, my intention at first was to merely listen in, however, after it got underway, I could not resist rising on my feet and singing."³¹

Although live broadcasts of UW athletic events were not educational by traditional definitions, Lighty enthusiastically scheduled them, particularly basketball games. The same telephone lines installed to broadcast live concerts from the Armory (the Red Gym) allowed live broadcast of sports from that location. Those lines connected the Armory to the WHA broadcast studio in Sterling Hall. WHA had relocated its studio and transmitter to Sterling Hall when the physics department moved there in 1917. Lighty scheduled these sports broadcasts to entice listeners to discover WHA and,

he hoped, the other material the station broadcast. The complaints that poured in when technical difficulties interfered with sports broadcasts demonstrated their popularity. Lighty might have been happier if technical problems with other programming had generated a similar level of frustration.

Filling enough broadcast hours became an increasingly important challenge for Lighty. Lilia Bascom remembered him telling reluctant participants that WHA needed to broadcast more than two or three hours a day or the federal government would give the frequency to a commercial broadcaster prepared to provide far more programming—probably including jazz and "fiddle music."³² Lighty's concern was justified. In its first decade of operation, WHA's programming consisted of the weather forecast, current prices for livestock and other agricultural products, and farm and home economics information for one hour at midday. The station returned to the air some evenings for an hour or two of educational talks, music appreciation, and live broadcasts of concerts and athletic events.



A live broadcast of a basketball game from the Red Gym at the heart of the University of Wisconsin campus in 1922. Live music was also broadcast from this location. IMAGE COURTESY OF THE UW-MADISON ARCHIVES, #S00024

The station needed to do much more to sustain its spot on the radio dial in the face of a frenzied gold rush for frequencies in the 1920s, when broadcasters realized they could get rich selling advertising around popular entertainment programs. A license to broadcast was virtually a license to print money and few not-for-profit broadcasters withstood the onslaught.

Lighty's challenge in generating programming for WHA paled, however, when compared to the technical and political obstacles faced by Professor Terry. Radio broadcasting in the 1920s resembled the Wild West. Broadcasters took to the air willy-nilly, interfering with each other's signals. Secretary of Commerce Herbert Hoover brought some order to the chaos by requiring licenses for stations seeking to broadcast. The licenses determined the hours a station could operate and its authorized radio frequency. The flood of new stations seeking airtime put pressure on existing stations—including "the oldest station in the nation"—to share the limited number of viable frequencies given the primitive technology of the time. Stations operated by not-for-profit entities with limited resources found themselves pitted against commercial enterprises with broad schedules of entertainment drawing large audiences. The not-for-profits landed at the bottom of the priority list for good broadcast hours and frequencies. Hoover and his staff argued that commercial stations reaching large audiences provided more "public service" than small stations with limited programming and few listeners.

Worse yet, the federal government forced WHA to switch frequencies—its spot on the radio dial—seemingly every few months. Such switching limited a station's ability to build a regular audience. Moreover, most years, WHA closed down for the summer months as well as for frequent technical modifications and upgrades. (The station remained a physics project, after all.) Whatever the value of its content, WHA's service was neither extensive nor reliable. Throughout the 1920s, WHA remained more a work in progress than a reliable public service. Toward the end of the decade, that reality began to change.

In 1925, the University Board of Regents sought a new leader to reinvigorate the progressive activism that had declined after the death of President Van Hise in 1917. They made a surprising choice in Glenn Frank. At only thirty-nine years old, Frank became the youngest university president in Wisconsin history. More surprising, he had no advanced degree nor any



Professors Earle Terry, left, and William Lighty pose in the improvised Sterling Hall studio in 1923. IMAGE COURTESY OF THE UW-MADISON ARCHIVES, #512746

significant experience as an academic. He was, however, something of a celebrity. He was a writer and public speaker and was sometimes mentioned as a potential president, not of the University of Wisconsin, but of the United States. In addition to his writing and public speaking, Frank edited a nationally prominent progressive magazine. These credentials may have made him a logical choice to lead the Wisconsin Idea of progressive reform and university activism, but they did not make him a good choice to preside over a major research university, especially one where a conservative academic culture belied its public image as a progressive hotbed. Frank never enjoyed the confidence of the faculty. In addition, the La Follette dynasty, which was synonymous with Wisconsin progressivism, did not welcome this interloper and potential rival. Nonetheless, Frank's administration elevated WHA from a physics experiment supported by the uncompensated time of idealistic volunteers to a permanent part of the university's mission.

The handful of advocates for WHA did not perceive Frank as an ally when he arrived on campus. Indeed, early in his administration, Frank, like his predecessor Edward Birge, declined to provide any funding to the station beyond what the physics department, General Extension, and Agricultural College allocated from their own resources. As Professor Hopkins remembered it, "There can be little question about the fact that President

Glenn Frank was lukewarm in his attitude toward the work of Professor Terry and the value of the radio station to the university."³³

Two years into the Frank presidency, the speech department hired a young assistant professor named Henry "Heiny" Ewbank, whose academic work centered on the importance of debate and public discussion in a democracy and whose major book carried the title *Discussion and Debate: Tools of Democracy*.³⁴ "A democracy can be permanently successful only if a majority of its citizens have intelligent and considered opinions on matters of public concern," he wrote, and added, "The discussion of public problems is essential to the formulation of this intelligent public opinion."³⁵ Not surprisingly, Ewbank saw a vital role for radio in promoting his vision of open and rational public debate.

Ewbank joined Terry, Lighty, and Hopkins on the informal radio committee and led them in confronting President Frank with a simple choice: either support WHA or kill it. The committee told Frank the station needed better facilities, money, and "a definite assignment of responsibility to see that satisfactory broadcasting conditions are maintained."³⁶ As an alternative, they said, the university might close down WHA and try to produce programs for privately owned stations such as WTMJ in Milwaukee. The president chose to support his radio station. He called a meeting of university department heads and asked each to pledge a certain amount of programming from their faculty and staff.

Frank formalized the University Radio Committee, dismissing Lighty as committee chair and station program director, a blow the idealistic educator never fully forgot nor forgave. Frank may have made the decision because Lighty lacked administrative skills, or because his obsession with radio took him away from the job the university paid him to do, directing correspondence study in General Extension. With Lighty pushed aside, President Frank "dumped the squawking, misunderstood foundling on the desk of Henry Ewbank because no one else would take it."³⁷ Ewbank became a national leader in teaching and research about radio, but he insisted he knew nothing about the medium when he accepted the assignment. "I didn't start from scratch; I started behind scratch," he recalled in 1946.³⁸ Nevertheless, he remained chair of the Radio Committee and its successor organizations for the next thirty years. As much as any other individual,

he shaped educational broadcasting in the state and fostered its unusual emphasis on facilitating democracy.

President Frank may have had reservations about radio when he took office in 1925 but they had changed to enthusiasm by the time he left in 1937. Writing in the *Annals of the American Academy of Political and Social Science* in 1935, the president of the University of Wisconsin declared that radio (and the talking picture and, in the future, television) would transform society as much as the printing press had five hundred years earlier.³⁹ He hailed the technical "genius" of those who developed radio, but expressed doubts about those who programmed it. He criticized educators who were "reluctant to change" and who regarded radio as inherently shoddy. Frank urged the use of broadcast technology in formal education, but he saw even greater potential for radio to shape democracy. He predicted that the technology itself would produce "a new kind of statesman and a new kind of voter." Whether commercial or noncommercial, "the microphone is the deadly enemy of the demagogue—a ruthless revealer of 'hokum.'" He believed individual citizens sitting by their radios were more critical, and more rational, than groups of citizens hearing the same information in a public meeting. On the radio, he wrote, ideas must stand on their own without "the crutch of emotional crowd reaction." Irrational arguments and pleas to emotion, which he termed "demagogic tricks," would cause Americans sitting in quiet rooms to "laugh derisively."⁴⁰

Frank's article quoted Gandhi: "You think your souls are saved because you can invent radio, but of what elevation to man is a method of broadcasting if you have only drivel to send out?" The UW president called on radio to soar above drivel because broadcast content educates and informs whether or not programmers intend it. His article laid out goals for educational radio that remain relevant in the twenty-first century. Radio programming, he said, needed to promote "intelligence and moral responsibility." It should seek not only a more intelligent nation but a more integrated nation, one that encourages understanding among diverse groups. He grasped that educational radio must seek out listeners who would not automatically flock to "quality." "Quality must learn to sing," he wrote, and concluded that education could "get away" with dullness if its target was a prisoner in a classroom, but not when that target

could turn from dull quality to interesting frivolity with a simple twist of the dial.⁴¹ (He expressed no opinion on the role of fiddle music in making education sing.)

In the view of the president of the University of Wisconsin in 1935, the weak signal that failed to impress those gathered in Professor Terry's living room in 1917 had acquired the power to become central to the future of democracy, to a more educated nation, and to a better understanding among diverse people. For the Wisconsin Idea to have any meaning at all, it had to use radio.

2

THE STATE STATIONS

1929-1945

On the first of May in 1929, Professor Terry died of a heart attack. He was only forty-nine.¹ He had set WHA on a path toward public service broadcasting, but others would take it to its destination. With Terry gone and Lighty banished, President Frank split the management of WHA between Professor Edward Bennett of the Engineering School and Professor Ewbank of the speech department. Bennett would handle technical and business operations, and Ewbank would oversee programming matters. Ewbank, in turn, hired a series of his graduate students as part-time program directors. The third young man he hired proved so dedicated and effective that the Radio Committee gave him a second one-year appointment as program director and made the appointment full-time. In 1931, they promoted him to full-time manager of WHA. Harold B. "Mac" McCarty became the first person able to devote all his considerable energies to that task. The journey Terry began, McCarty continued over the next thirty-five years.

After graduating from the University of Illinois, McCarty came to the University of Wisconsin to study and teach acting. He remained a performer throughout his career. Had he not come to the university, he might have become a circus barker or ringmaster, cheerfully and enthusiastically stirring a crowd's excitement for the wondrous acts he was about to present. He was at his best presiding over meetings of Madison's downtown Rotary Club, leading songs and the Pledge of Allegiance. The Rotarian displayed a talent for diplomacy. He deftly manipulated those