



When Cowboys Rode the Airwaves

From the mid-1930s through the 1950s, the Vermont airwaves resounded to the live sounds of “cowboy bands”—often in full Hollywood movie finery and playing a mixture of country and western songs, fiddle tunes, jazz standards, and pop tunes of the day. At night, the bands drew large crowds to barn dances throughout the state. But by the mid-1950s rock and roll had begun to take its toll, and the Vermont cowboy bands faded into the sunset.

BY MARK GREENBERG

If you were taking a Saturday morning stroll along Main Street in Waterbury in the early 1940s, you might have thought you’d wandered onto the set of the latest Hollywood western as men in full cowboy regalia emerged from the rooming houses and restaurants, loaded up their wagons, and hit the trail. Instead of six-guns, however, these cowpokes carried musical instrument cases and sometimes even strapped a stand-up bass to the roof of their station—not covered—wagons. After a short drive, most of these hombres would head into the Blush Hill studio of radio station WDEV, where they’d open the cases, tune up their guitars, fiddles, and basses, and gather around the single microphone for their weekly fifteen minutes of music, banter, and plugs for their upcoming personal appearances and souvenir photos.

It was, according to accordionist and radio cowboy Zeke Zelonis, “just like goddamn Dodge City.”¹ That image was reinforced by the late Craig “Rusty” Parker, longtime WDEV station manager. Water-

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bury back then, said Parker, invoking another American city not usually associated with quiet, rural Vermont, was the “Nashville of Northern New England.”² Yet, like Nashville station WSM’s Grand Ole Opry, WDEV was where central Vermonters tuned in for live music played by skilled musicians following the trail of Gene Autry and the western-style groups, such as the Sons of the Pioneers, that were winning rural audiences across the U.S. (and Canada) with music that was part traditional, part Tin Pan Alley, and part Hollywood. It was music that the late Waterbury virtuoso fiddler and bandleader Don Fields, the “King of the Vermont Cowboys,” wryly called “synthetic western.”³

Now a medium for mostly recorded music, radio originally depended on live performances for much of its content. In 1924, the Sears and Roebuck-sponsored “National Barn Dance” on WLS (World’s Largest Store) in Chicago became the model for the Grand Ole Opry, the WWVA “Jamboree” (Wheeling, West Virginia), the “Louisiana Hayride,” and other radio variety shows that provided homespun entertainment for rural audiences. Local musicians could hear and learn the songs and styles that were gaining national popularity, while barnstorming musicians could use their radio appearances to publicize their personal appearances. Short early morning (for milking farmers) and noon-time shows by local bands and touring musicians also became popular. All of this contributed to the creation of standardized popular styles that threatened and often displaced local vernacular culture while being presented as genuine folk art. In the introduction to a 1941 souvenir booklet for Fields’s band, The Pony Boys, WDEV owner Lloyd Squier commended Fields for helping to preserve “American Folk Songs . . . many of which were handed down to us from pioneer forefathers.”⁴

Not everyone agreed. Concerned about the new medium’s effect on older (and perhaps “purer”) Vermont ways, the Committee on Traditions and Ideals of the Vermont Commission on Country Life in 1930 asked Springfield writer and arts patron Helen Hartness Flanders to travel the state collecting old songs and tunes, particularly those rooted in the Scots-Irish-Anglo traditions of Vermont settlers.⁵ Mrs. Flanders, fearing that it was already too late, nevertheless accepted the charge. But while Flanders did find and help preserve a bonanza of Vermont music rooted in the nineteenth century and earlier, radios were fairly common in relatively isolated Vermont, and homogenized popular culture continued its relentless march forward.

Other media contributed to this change as well. In the 1930s, Americans looking for escape from the ravages of the Great Depression quickly fell under the spell of a new, mythic American hero, the singing

cowboy. It was a sign of both hard and changing times. “The farther Americans became removed from the cowboy past,” writes country music historian Bill C. Malone, “the more intense became their interest in cowboy songs and lore.”⁶

Introduced into popular culture by the dime-store novels that began appearing in the 1860s, the cowboy was first portrayed as more of a scoundrel than a hero, a rough-hewn cattle driver who liked to let off steam by getting drunk and shooting up the town. A more romanticized figure began to emerge in the 1880s from Buffalo Bill Cody’s “Wild West Show,” followed by Owen Wister’s novel, *The Virginian*, in 1902. In 1903 the first narrative film, *The Great Train Robbery*, set the stage for the cowboy as the hero who saved the day. Following the addition of sound in 1927, Ken Maynard soon became the movies’ first singing cowboy, leading the way for Gene Autry, Roy Rogers, and others who evoked a simpler, pre-Depression time when, at least in the telling, goodness prevailed and a smoothly sung ballad could win a fair maiden’s heart.

In Vermont, as throughout Northern New England, cowboys and other rugged individualists had been long-standing ideals, and by 1930, according to musician and researcher Clifford R. Murphy, “Country & Western [music] had become a relatively lucrative occupation . . . from Connecticut to Maine.”⁷ Some Southern musicians, including Bluegrass Roy, Bradley Kincaid, and Ramona Jones, even relocated—albeit briefly—to New England in the 1930s.⁸ Others included New England on their tours, as did Otto Gray and His Oklahoma Cowboys, the first of the traveling Western bands, when they stopped at WDEV in the mid-’30s. They also made a deep impression on a young announcer named Don Fields.

Fields was just a few months old in 1913 when his family moved to Waterbury from Montreal so his father could work on the railroad. The elder Fields was also a fiddler, a country-style ear player. “He was pretty good at it, and he knew quite a few tunes—‘Irish Washerwoman,’ ‘Devil’s Dream,’ ‘Portland Fancy,’ ‘Old Zip Coon,’” Fields recalled. By age five or six Don was playing too. “I know I had quite a time to chin the full-size fiddle,” he recalled in 1981 at his home on the slopes of Camel’s Hump in Duxbury. “And that’s all I had. Reach right out straight to get to the fingering part.”⁹

Soon Fields began taking proper violin lessons from local music maestros, first a Mr. Trombley, then a Mr. Bruce, who hoped to send his prized student to Europe to pursue a classical career. Although the death of Don’s father in 1928 ended any such thoughts, Fields never lost his taste for classical music, becoming a great admirer of classical

violinists Fritz Kreisler and Jascha Heifetz as well as jazz virtuoso Stephane Grappelli. With the Depression looming, Fields was forced to quit high school and get a job.

But he didn't quit music. At basketball games, St. Patrick's Day dances, and other local social events Fields played popular fox trots and waltzes along with a smattering of the older fiddle music with a group that variously included fiddle, tenor banjo, piano, drums, sax, and guitar. Occasionally, in the late 1920s, he'd still play at a "kitchen tunk" or "junket," a musical party in a local farmhouse and a vanishing reminder of the days before electronic sound inventions altered home entertainment for Vermonters. "You'd take the largest room," Fields remembered, "move the furniture, roll up the rug. You could have a square dance. You could have a waltz. You could do most anything like that. Generally there'd be a neighboring fellow on the fiddle, his wife on piano. I played for a few. I liked it quite well. Just a good neighborly time, you know. Someday they'll come back, I bet."¹⁰

By the early 1930s, however, commercial "hillbilly" music had begun taking over. Fields found the music easy to play. He also started announcing at WDEV and got to know the traveling bands, including Otto Gray's. That was the group that Fields emulated with the little



Pony Boys. Left-to-right: Don Fields, Chickie Corelli, Andrew "Zeke" Zelonis, Carl Durgan, Bob Preavy. No date. Courtesy of the author.

band he put together around 1935 to play on the air at noon. Eventually, Fields' group became the Pony Boys, whose broadcasts some weeks drew as many as 200 letters to WDEV. Eventually the Pony Boys added regular shows on WJOY and WCAX in Burlington and WNBX in Springfield to their radio schedule. At the latter station, Fields met and struck up a friendship with nationally prominent balladeer Bradley Kincaid, "The Kentucky Mountain Boy." And when the film *Scattergood Baines* had its world premiere in Montpelier in 1941, Fields appeared on stage with its star, Guy Kibbee.¹¹

Fields himself was not particularly interested in the big time, however, and he remained a strictly local phenomenon, secure in his ability to attract as many as 900 people (huge crowds even by today's Vermont standards) to the larger barn dances. "I'd have taken it if it came," he said of greater fame, "but I didn't look for it. I had a pretty good life. The money was pretty good, and I was doing something that I liked."¹²

He also remained steadfastly eclectic. Along with such "folk" chestnuts as "Red River Valley" and such old-time fiddle tunes as "Soldier's Joy," Fields regaled his audiences with jazzy pop songs like "Bill Bailey" and "Honeysuckle Rose." It was the Swing Era, and even rural music reflected America's enthrallment with the popular, up-beat, anti-Depression dance music of the Dorsey Brothers and Benny Goodman. Later in the 1940s, the combination of the older country breakdowns and the newer rhythms and harmonies derived from African American jazz would be called Western Swing, perhaps most associated with Bob Wills and the Texas Playboys.

Other bands were sprouting up throughout Vermont as well, including Shorty and the Pioneers, the Bar-X Cowboys, the Western Aces, and the Broncho Busters. Following their sometimes daily broadcasts on WDEV, WWSR in St. Albans, WNBX in Springfield, and WCAX in Burlington, many of the bands would load up their cars and head to dances throughout Vermont and into western New York and even Canada.

Occasionally, a Vermont musical cowboy brushed up against greater fame. Accordionist Joe Mayo, of the St. Albans-based Western Aces and the Western Ramblers, was born in Pennsylvania and began his musical career as a regular on Wheeling, West Virginia's WWVA, and once played with Gene Autry, America's leading singing movie cowboy. Mayo also recalled spending a wartime afternoon in Paris jamming with guitarist Django Reinhardt and receiving an invitation to join the legendary Gypsy jazz musician's group. He declined, as he did a later invitation to play with the Lawrence Welk Orchestra.¹³

One of Mayo's partners in the Western Aces, bassist-guitarist-singer-



Western Aces. Left-to-right: Carl Durgan, Buddy Truax, Joe Mayo, Cliff Japhet. No date. Courtesy of the author.

trumpet player-songwriter Cliff Japhet, however, did respond to the call of the big—or at least bigger—time, joining up for a while with Polly Jenkins, who had sung with Otto Gray and who had appeared with Gene Autry in the 1938 film *The Man from Music Mountain*. The first woman to headline a country music act on the vaudeville circuit, Jenkins soon formed her own band, Polly Jenkins and Her Musical Plowboys, featuring such novelty “instruments” as a hay rake, hat rack, and funnels. Jenkins toured widely before landing in Waterbury, where she continued to sing on WDEV.

Born in Portland, N.Y., Japhet began as a solo singer-guitarist, then started the Broncho Busters along with fiddler Lyman “The Old Sheriff” Meade before leaving to tour with Jenkins. In 1947 Japhet headed for St. Albans, along with Joe and Jimmy Mayo, to form the Western Aces and to fill a slot on radio station WWSR that had recently been vacated by Meade’s group.¹⁴

Japhet and Mayo weren't the only outsiders to find fertile musical ground in Vermont.

Dusty Miller and the Colorado Wranglers started out in their home state in the early 1930s, then followed the trail east until, by the mid-1940s, they were performing on WCAX and WDEV. Meanwhile, Dusty's brother, Jimmy, and his band, the Saddle Mates, now with Vermonters Smokey and Lois Carey, landed in Rutland, eventually joining the parade of cowboy bands at WDEV, which included Pennsylvanian Jack Carnes and the Kentucky Ramblers (featuring Canadian fiddler Slim Coxx), along with the Pony Boys, the Northern Ridge Runners, and Buddy Truax and His Playboys.

It was probably guitarist-fiddler-saxophonist-vocalist Sheldon "Buddy" Truax who came the closest to touching the big time. Born into a musical family in Dunkin, Québec, in 1923, Truax began winning local talent contests with his singing in the mid-1930s, after his family had moved to Troy, Vermont. A smooth-voiced crooner, Truax had begun figuring out chords on an uncle's guitar in Canada. He also started playing fiddle.¹⁵

Sometime between ages 12 and 14, while he was still going to school and working in his father's veneer mill and learning carpentry, Truax formed a band, the Newport Ramblers, which he recalled as a "little noisy thing with a banjo, guitar, bass, all that stuff. We played little honky tonk places for 3, 4 bucks a night."¹⁶ The band also performed at church socials and grange halls, with Buddy fiddling for square dances and singing and playing guitar on popular Country and Western songs learned by ear from the radio.

The guitar soon became young Buddy's passion. In 1940 he was working at his father's mill in Bethel, Vermont, when he received a call from Don Fields to take over as the Pony Boys' guitarist. He jumped at the chance. "I walked right over to the [milling] machine and pushed the button and said to the guy, 'I'm all done.' Walked right out and never came back," Buddy recalled.¹⁷

World War II interrupted Truax's stint as a Pony Boy. It also exposed him to a new musical world. Assigned to the army's Special Services Unit, Truax spent his military service playing guitar with musicians from all over the country, including such nationally, and even internationally, known players as trombonist Glenn Miller and members of his popular swing band. For the troops, Truax and his bandmates played what Truax called "modern dance music."¹⁸ For themselves, however, Buddy and musicians including pianist Mel Powell and other players from Miller's, Stan Kenton's, and other bands put aside the written parts and arrangements and played improvised jazz. It was the music that was to remain

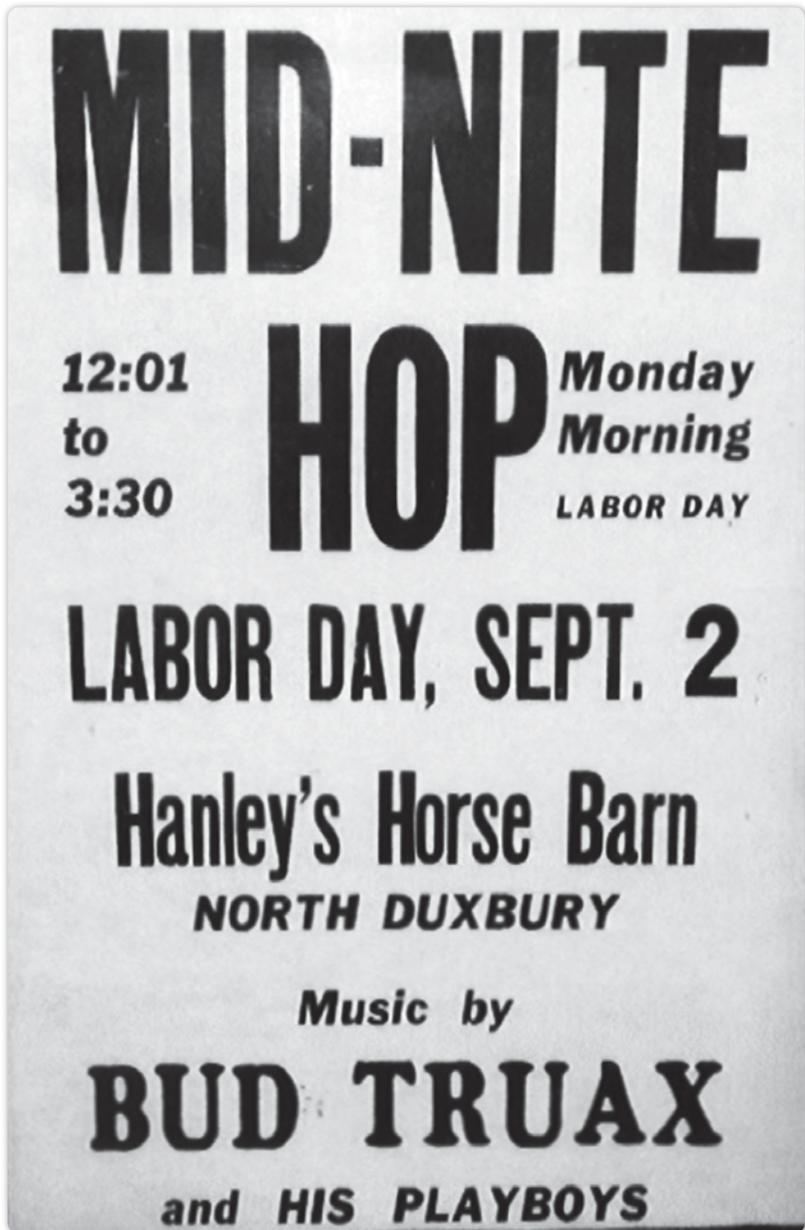
at the top of Truax's personal hit parade. His skill as a jazz player served him well when, back in Vermont, he was called to play with Louis Armstrong at International House in Newport, along with jazz legends drummer Cozy Cole, pianist Earl "Fatha" Hines, and trombonist Jack Teagarden. He also played, on at least one occasion, with Armstrong, Hines, and Teagarden at the famous Birdland jazz club in New York City.¹⁹

But the big time didn't interest Truax, even when Canada's first country music star, Wilf Carter, better known as Montana Slim, offered him a job. Buddy was working in St. Albans when a big car pulled up at the store and a guy with a guitar got out. It was country music singer, songwriter, guitarist, and yodeler Carter, who had heard of Buddy and who invited the Vermonter to join him on the road. But, again, Buddy chose to stay close to home. "I'd seen all the road I wanted to see for a while," he wryly recalled.²⁰ Truax remained a Vermont cowboy, lending his talents to several St. Albans-area groups including the Broncho Busters, The Old Sheriff, and the Western Aces. In 1950 he rejoined the Pony Boys and around 1953 formed his own band, the Playboys.

Along with ex-Pony Boys' banjoist Smokey Carey and accordionist Zeke Zelonis, Buddy's Playboys included his younger sister, Barb, who played piano, sang lead on some songs, and joined Buddy for harmony duets. Like Fields's group and other Vermont cowboy bands, the Playboys wore western clothes and featured current Nashville hits along with pop standards. Barb especially liked Patsy Cline songs, while Buddy favored country crooner Jim Reeves. Hank Williams, he said, "was a little too honky for me."²¹ The band could also strike up a hot "Blue Suede Shoes" or "Down by the Riverside"—"show stuff," in Buddy's term—that sometimes featured key changes and other ear-catching arrangements. There was always a hot, jazzed-up guitar tune as well. Still, according to Truax, it was the singing that got the attention.²²

But while Vermont was fertile territory for the cowboy bands, life on the musical range wasn't easy. Some, like the Pony Boys, maintained a daily broadcast schedule, some days playing on two stations, then racing to gigs on pre-interstate roads in cars bulging with musicians, instruments, and costumes. "I don't know how some of those trips were made," Fields said, recalling a weekly Sunday night gig across Lake Champlain in New York. "That was a short-cut to the cemetery, I'll tell you that. I don't know why I did it."²³

Nor were accommodations lavish. Cliff Japhet recalled sharing a single room in the old St. Albans Hotel with the three other Western Aces



Poster for dance at Hanley's Horse Barn, North Duxbury, Vermont [1957]. Courtesy of the author.

for their first winter in Vermont.²⁴ Joe Mayo pointed to the wear-and-tear on both his instruments and his body: “In fourteen years I went through fourteen accordions,” he said, pointing out that the heavy instrument wreaked havoc on his back until he “couldn’t hold it no more.”²⁵ Truax and the Playboys also kept a grueling schedule, playing dances as far afield as Cherry River, Québec, and Chazy, N.Y., before hustling back to Waterbury for their 9:30 AM broadcast. “That was a rugged life,” Buddy recalled.²⁶

The times were changing as well, and by the mid-1950s the Vermont cowboy bands had begun riding into the sunset. After the war, bars began to supplant barn dances as the preferred venue for younger audiences and the latest musical styles.²⁷ The newer honky tonk music, with its songs of cheating and heartache, epitomized by the songs and plaintive singing of Hank Williams, was more suitable, perhaps, to what musician-historian (and latter-day singing cowboy) Douglas B. Green has called a “new sense of realism in America.”²⁸ Idealized, nostalgic odes to hearth, home, and rural life—country music staples since the first successful commercial country music recording, “The Little Old Log Cabin in the Lane,” by Fiddling John Carson in 1923²⁹—were no longer in fashion. Soon, only the term “Country and Western,” big hats, rhinestone-festooned costumes, and “synthetic western” classics such as “Cool Water” and “Tumbling Tumbleweeds” were all that was left of the cowboy music craze.

The biggest threat came from one of the music’s own offspring, the latest American musical hybrid, Western Swing, with more blues and a heavier beat—the music soon to be known as rock and roll. “Elvis was coming on the scene, and things were changing pretty fast,” ex-Pony Boy guitarist and singer Chuck Donnelly maintained.³⁰ By the late 1950s, Don Fields had had enough (although he returned for a summer spin on WDEV in the 1970s). Buddy Truax lasted a bit longer, until 1962, when he disbanded the Playboys to devote himself to running the Waterbury restaurant he owned with his wife, whom he had met at a Don Fields barn dance.

Moreover, the new electronic medium, television, was replacing radio. A few bands made the transition for a while. For thirteen weeks in the mid-1950s the Bunkhouse Trio—Cliff Japhet, Pee Wee Arsenault, and Lyman Meade—appeared on WMVT-TV, followed by Buddy Truax and the Playboys on “The Real Chrome Roundup” on WCAX. When Duke Palilo and His Swingbillies, with their repertoire of honky tonk, as well as “classic” Nashville music, moved to Winooski from Maine in 1958, they landed on WCAX, where they held down a daily fifteen-minute slot until 1962, traveling, as had their cowboy band predecessors, to

as many as six or seven gigs a week. Willing and able to play rockabilly and rock and roll numbers, the Swingbillies, featuring singer Doris Waite (Lee Jollota), who later settled in Marshfield, Vermont, pointed the way toward the next generation of Vermont country bands, for whom rock and roll, not swing, would provide the favored up-tempo dance beat.

Soon the sun had set on the Vermont cowboy bands, and live music of any sort was becoming increasingly rare on the radio. Even the magazine published by the Vermont Association of Broadcasters to commemorate its thirty-fifth anniversary in 1989 made scant mention of the cowboy bands that had ridden the Vermont airways just a few decades earlier.³¹ The popular Country and Western music and the radio cowboys who played it—once seen as sullyng Vermont’s musical history—were now part of that history as well.

RECORDINGS

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AUDIO LINKS

Don Fields: <http://www.upstreetproductions.com/DonFields.html> (music samples).

Lee Jollota: <http://www.upstreetproductions.com/Lee.htm> (music samples).

NOTES

¹ Zeke Zelonis, interviewed by Mark Greenberg, Colchester, Vermont, 20 October 1981.

² Craig “Rusty” Parker, interviewed by Mark Greenberg, Waterbury, Vermont, 22 July 1981.

³ Don Fields, interviewed by Mark Greenberg, Duxbury, Vermont, 22 July 1981.

⁴ L. E. Squier, “Foreword,” *Don Fields and His Pony Boys* (Waterbury, Vt.: The Record Press, no date).

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⁶ Bill C. Malone, *Country Music USA* (Austin: University of Texas Press, 1984), 138.

⁷ Clifford R. Murphy, “The Diesel Cowboy in New England: Source and Symbol in Dick Curless’s ‘A Tombstone Every Mile,’” *Journal of American Folklore*, 127 (Spring 2014): 194.

⁸ *Ibid.*, 263.

⁹ Fields, interview, 1981.

¹⁰ *Ibid.*

¹¹ *Ibid.*

¹² *Ibid.*

¹³ Joe Mayo, interviewed by Mark Greenberg, St. Albans, Vermont, 12 April 2004.

¹⁴ Cliff Japhet, interviewed by Mark Greenberg, Burlington, Vermont, 1 April 2004.

¹⁵ Sheldon “Buddy” Truax, interviewed by Mark Greenberg, Waterbury, Vermont, 27 October 1981.

¹⁶ *Ibid.*

¹⁷ *Ibid.*

¹⁸ *Ibid.*

¹⁹ *Ibid.*

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²⁰ Ibid.

²¹ Ibid.

²² Ibid.

²³ Fields, interview, 1981.

²⁴ Japhet, interview, 2004.

²⁵ Mayo, interview, 2004.

²⁶ Truax, interview, 1981.

²⁷ Charles "Chuck" Donnelly, interviewed by Mark Greenberg, Ferrisburgh, Vermont, 1984.

²⁸ Douglas B. Green, "The Singing Cowboy, An American Dream," in Paul Kingsbury, ed., *The Country Reader: Twenty-five Years of the Journal of Country Music* (Nashville and London: The Country Music Foundation Press and Vanderbilt University Press, 1996), 66.

²⁹ Malone, *Country Music USA*, 37-38.

³⁰ Donnelly, interview, 1984.

³¹ Ellie Thompson, *Seventy Years of Vermont Broadcasting* (Colchester, Vt.: Vermont Association of Broadcasters, 1989).