

# Messenger

## Station KGIR in Butte

by Mary Murphy

Was dead from the waist both ways till I tuned in on KGIR but now hot dog I could climb a cactus bush sixty eight feet high with a panther under both arms trim my toe nails with a forty-five when I reached the summit slide back to earth without a scratch hotdawg whoopee cmon have one with us fellas wine for the ladies n everything.

With that classic western accolade greeting its inaugural program, radio station KGIR arrived in Butte, Montana, on February 1, 1929, just ahead of the Great Depression. It performed a dual, sometimes contradictory function during that economic crisis. In a time of almost universal belt-tightening, the allure of the radio impelled people to buy receivers on credit, and commercial programming bombarded listeners with advertisements designed to increase their desire for consumer goods. But the radio also provided a source of comfort, news, and entertainment for the unemployed and underemployed who could no longer afford movies, vacations, restaurant meals, and other pleasures of the consumer society. A radio was a substitute for many of the leisure activities that people gave up during those hard years, but it also prepared them to indulge freely in consumerism once good times returned. Through network programming, KGIR introduced Butte listeners to a developing national culture, while also giving considerable air time to local performers and shows. In this way, Butte's first commercial radio station created an amalgam of news and entertainment that celebrated local talent and served community groups, while exposing its audience to programs of national popularity and significance.<sup>1</sup>

KGIR was Edmund B. Craney's brainchild. Until it began broadcasting, the only radio signals emanating from Butte were those of amateur operators. Arriving in Butte in 1927, Craney saw a potential market and applied for a commercial broadcast license. With wide-ranging and farsighted interests, Craney was the first station owner in Montana to affiliate with a national network, the National Broadcasting Company, in 1931. KGIR also became the flagship of a statewide network of radio stations known as the Z-Bar. In accordance with his own personal philosophy, Craney attempted through radio to instill in citizens of the Big Sky a sense of themselves as Montanans, rather than as isolated residents of an archipelago of small towns and cities.<sup>2</sup>

*Ed Craney and Emmett Burke hosted KGIR's "Night Owl" program on Saturday nights during the mid-1930s.*





# er of the New Age



All photographs from MHS Photograph Archives



**R**adio was the medium of communication of the 1920s and 1930s. The nation's first radio station, KDKA, Pittsburgh, broadcast the results of the Harding-Cox presidential election in 1920 and began regularly scheduled programs in 1921. Early radio fans were attracted not so much by regular transmissions or even the content of programs, but by the romance of distance. Radio telescoped the vast expanses of the West, bringing to rural dwellers the sounds of the city, facilitating communication between towns and outlying ranches, easing the loneliness of isolated lives. Edward P. Morgan, an Idahoan who became a broadcast commentator in Washington, D.C., dated the start of his love affair with radio to his father's purchase of a DeForest set in the mid-1920s. "My night sounds had been the sharp haunting bark of coyotes," Morgan remembered, "but now the boundaries of my world suddenly dilated far beyond the sagebrush hills of Idaho, and through the hissing swish of static, like a bell pealing in a snowstorm, came the sweet, wavering voices of KHJ, Los Angeles, KDKA, Pittsburgh, and, one enchanted evening, Havana, Cuba."<sup>3</sup>

While entrancing, the signals from distant stations were irregular and spurred some Montanans to build local stations. Without the resources common in metropolitan areas, commercial radio in the state developed slowly and sporadically. Between 1922, when KDYS, Montana's first commercial station, debuted in Great Falls, and 1929, when KGIR went on the air in Butte, small stations opened in Havre, Missoula, Vida, Kalispell, and Billings. Programs depended on local talent and leaned heavily toward stock and grain market reports, coverage of school sports, updates on the weather, and direct messages to farm and ranch families.<sup>4</sup>

Throughout the 1920s, commercial radio was distinctly non-commercial. Advertising agencies, sponsors, radio manufacturers, and broadcasters viewed the new medium as an educational tool, an avenue of cultural uplift. Sponsors limited their advertising to modest announcements of who was paying for the program at its beginning and end, or they attached brand names to orchestras and performers, such as the A & P Gypsies, the Lucky Strike Orchestra, and the Best Food Boys. Owen D. Young, chairman of General Electric and RCA, announced in 1926 that he considered the companies' new subsidiary, NBC, to be "semi-philanthropic."<sup>5</sup>

By 1929, advertisers' insistence on sponsorship had faded. The advertising industry had mushroomed during the 1920s; its successful cultivation of a consumer society fed its continued growth. Agencies realized that the intimacy of radio offered an unprecedented opportunity to personalize advertising, and they discovered that listeners did not mind commercials. Listeners often heard the ads as part of the entertainment, and pollsters had found that what radio fans wanted was entertainment. Advertisers began to design commercials as part of the show and to listen to radio station managers who advised: "Ditch Dvorak. They want 'Turkey in the Straw.'"<sup>6</sup>

Radio in Butte bypassed the semi-philanthropic days of the 1920s. When the Symons Company of Spokane announced its intention to start up KGIR, the *Montana Free Press* reported that the station would be "frankly a commercial proposition." Ed Craney, KGIR's manager, had been involved in the radio business for seven years when he came to Butte. Already an amateur operator when he graduated from high school in Spokane in 1922, Craney got a job running a radio parts store owned by lawyer Thomas W. Symons, Jr. As in many small metropolitan areas, the absence of good radio signals in Spokane made it difficult to sell receiving sets, so Craney and Symons started their own radio station to boost equipment sales. KFDC, Spokane went on the air in October 1922, one of the more than fourteen hundred stations that received licenses from the Department of Commerce in 1922-1923. Business picked up, and the two men expanded their sales to western Montana. It was during the course of his sales trips that Craney pinpointed Butte, "a real rip-roaring town," as a plum site for a new station.<sup>7</sup>

Craney received a license for KGIR in 1928 and began construction on the station late that year. He built studios in the third floor of Shiner's furniture store in uptown Butte and, to make sure the transmitter's antenna was fully supported, rigged it from Shiner's roof across the street to the roof of the opposite building. Radio fans avidly followed Craney's progress and geared up for the initial broadcast, scheduled for January 31. Shiner's offered a special price on "Freshman" radios, and the *Butte Daily Post* promised a free crystal set to any boy or girl who enrolled three new subscribers to

1. Margaret Micky and Willie to Ed Craney, February 1, 1929, Edmund B. Craney Papers, Box 2, folder 6, Montana Historical Society Archives, Helena [EBC Papers].

2. "50th Anniversary Program," KGIR-KXLF, tape recording in possession of Scott Steen.

3. Edward P. Morgan, "Who Forgot Radio?" in *Problems and Controversies in Television and Radio*, ed. Harry J. Skornia and Jack William Kitson (Palo Alto, California: Pacific Books Publishers, 1968), 117.

4. Ron P. Richards, "The History of Radio Broadcasting in Montana" (M.A. thesis, Montana State University, Bozeman, 1963), 16, 24-25, 29, 40, 52-58, 66, 73, 77.

5. Erik Barnouw, *A Tower in Babel, A History of Broadcasting in the United States to 1933* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1966), 158; Arnold Shaw, *The Jazz Age, Popular Music in the 1920's* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1987), 127; Roland Marchand, *Advertising the American Dream: Making Way for Modernity, 1920-1940* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1985), 89-90.

6. Marchand, *Advertising the Dream*, 107-116.



KGIR pleased its local audience in Butte by having musical groups from the community perform on the air.

the paper. Craney later claimed that radio dealers told him they sold three thousand crystal sets during the first week of broadcasting.<sup>8</sup>

**O**n the night of January 31, Butte listeners tuned in to a recording of the "Star Spangled Banner" and the dedication of the station by the Catholic bishop, a Methodist minister, and a rabbi. Then followed twelve hours of musical selections and orations performed by men, women, and children from the Butte area, directed by three prominent Butte music teachers. Hundreds of letters and telegrams sent to the station the next day testified to listeners' delight.<sup>9</sup>

About a month after KGIR's debut, Craney arranged to broadcast Herbert Hoover's inauguration. It was KGIR's first hookup with NBC and more than any other event illustrated the radio fever that gripped Butte. Days before the broadcast, a festive

spirit infused the city, as radio owners planned "inauguration breakfasts" so that friends and relatives could gather to eat and drink and listen to Hoover's swearing-in. On inauguration day, crowds massed outside the stores of radio dealers who had hung loudspeakers on their buildings. The Butte Radio Club and the Montana Stock and Bond Company hosted open houses for listeners. Restaurants and department stores aired the broadcast for diners and shoppers. Public and Catholic high school students listened in their auditoriums. Two thousand seventh and eighth graders heard the program over a loudspeaker installed in the Broadway Theater and cheered as the bands passed the reviewing stand in Washington, D.C. The following day, the *Montana Standard*, which had absorbed most of the cost of the program, reported: "The inauguration was made actual, vital—something a great deal more than a remote happening . . . it was as if the listener here were standing among the throngs on the capital lawn. . . ."<sup>10</sup>

7. *Montana Free Press*, January 3, 1929; biographical sketch in description of EBC Papers; Edmund B. Craney, telephone interview with author, October 15, 1988; Richards, "History of Broadcasting," 87-88; "50th Anniversary Program"; Barnouw, *Tower in Babel*, 91; Curtis Mitchell, *Cavalcade of Broadcasting* (Chicago: Follett Publishing, 1970), 79.

8. Richards, "History of Broadcasting," 90; "50th Anniversary Program."

9. Clipping, undated, EBC Papers, 112-10.

10. *Montana Standard*, March 3, 1929, EBC Papers; *Montana Standard*, March 5, 1929.





Once KGIR affiliated with NBC, Montanans could listen to such programs as the Western Farm and Home Hour, with Jennings Pierce at the microphone.

Gabriel Moulin, photographer, San Francisco

The inauguration broadcast stimulated radio sales in Butte. Orton Brothers music store, which had lamented that "the only difficulty in recent months has been to obtain a sufficient number of sets to supply the demands of our customers," announced the imminent arrival of a major shipment of new radios. One trainload of four thousand Majestic receivers, the "biggest single shipment of radio receivers ever routed to the northwest," arrived at the Butte depot on March 23. Butte business directories had listed no radio dealers during the 1920s; by 1930 there were five, and by 1934 seven were serving the city's fans. People added radios to the list of durable goods, such as automobiles and furniture, that they purchased on installment plans. They accepted indebtedness for the delights provided by the radio and the ability of KGIR to link Butte to a larger world in ways more intimate and immediate than newspapers, traveling theater, or even the movies.<sup>11</sup>

11. *Montana Standard*, March 23, March 6, 1929.

12. *Montana Standard*, March 11, 1929.

13. *Montana Standard*, March 17, 1929; *Butte Daily Post*, March 16, 1929, EBC Papers, 112-10; *Montana Standard*, May 10, 1929; Marian White Arts and Crafts Club Minutes, April 3, April 17, 1930, Butte-Silver Bow Public Archives; undated clippings, EBC Papers, 112-10.

Between 1929 and 1931, before KGIR affiliated with NBC and began receiving nationally syndicated programs, the station explored the potential of broadcasting from Butte. Management created fanciful promotions to multiply advertising revenues, engaged local talent who performed in the station's studios, supplementing the phonograph records and occasional transcriptions that formed the bulk of programming, increased coverage of local events, and groped toward a determination of listeners' pleasures. Craney's unfamiliarity with Butte led to some gaffs that other staff members caught. A few months after its debut, for example, the station began a request hour. One night when Craney was running the program, his salesman Leo McMullen came in and asked what he was doing. Craney replied, "We're having request hour." "Request hour, hell," replied McMullen, "you're advertising every whore in Butte." "Gladys at 2 Upper Terrace" and "Dorothy at 8 Lower Terrace" had quickly discovered the commercial benefits of local broadcasting.<sup>12</sup>

14. H. C. Smith to E. B. Craney, March 15, 1929, E. B. Craney to Mr. McClelland (vice-president and general manager, NBC), April 6, 1929, EBC Papers, 2-7; "50th Anniversary Program."

Most broadcasts, however, were aboveboard. Local celebrities like Howard Melaney, the "singing fireman" of the Northern Pacific Railway, joined a roster of performances by the Camp Fire Girls, the Rocky Mountain Garden Club, and other civic groups. In May 1929, KGIR observed National Music Week with a special choral broadcast of eighty-five Butte mothers and daughters. Craney solicited local groups to put on their own shows. The Marian White Arts and Crafts Club proudly noted that "our radio station" wanted programs from the club's various departments and promptly responded with short talks three times a week. In the fall of 1929, KGIR broadcast the Rotana Club's Montana Products Dinner from the Masonic Temple, a gala evening celebrating Montana-grown products, speeches, and music.<sup>13</sup>

**B**eginning in 1929 Craney had appealed to NBC for "programs of national importance" and sought affiliate status with the network. He described the isolation of many Montana listeners who "can receive no other station than KGIR and many of them depend on our station for the newspaper can reach them only from 24 to 72 hours late." NBC was concentrated in the East. At the time of Craney's request it had extended its service to only a few cities west of the Mississippi and feared the unprofitability of a hook-up in a small market like Montana. Craney persuaded Senator Burton K. Wheeler to intercede; and NBC, hoping to please an increasingly powerful politician, partially accommodated Craney. On November 28, 1931, KGIR affiliated with NBC, although the network supplied only an incomplete roster of programs to the station.<sup>14</sup>

Despite the new shows available through NBC, Craney continued to solicit local talent sponsored by local advertisers and to balance commercial broadcasting with community service. One of the most successful programs of the 1930s was the amateur hour sponsored by Symons Department Store. Ray Schilling, advertising manager for the store, decided to test the powers of radio, and Symons scheduled a sale and advertised only on KGIR; nothing appeared in the newspapers. The response was overwhelming, and Schilling was converted. He and his brother then developed Butte's own amateur hour—a fad that was sweeping the radio world

during the mid-1930s. Art Chappelle played his accordion on the amateur hour; and shortly thereafter Craney approached Art's father, the owner of Chappelle's Cleaning Works, to sponsor a fifteen-minute program of Art's accordion music. Art, who during high school had a band called the Whirlwinds and still moonlighted as a musician in addition to driving his father's delivery truck, was happy to oblige. Three times a week he stopped his truck at the KGIR studio, brought in his accordion, and played a selection of polkas and waltzes. Often he performed melodies popular with Butte's ethnic communities—an entire selection of Italian music, or Irish, Polish, or Finnish songs. Art played requests, signed an occasional autograph, and was delighted when he dropped off someone's dry cleaning and they said, "I just heard you on the radio!"<sup>15</sup>

While hundreds of Butte residents performed on KGIR, thousands participated in station-sponsored contests or wrote unsolicited letters. In 1930, Craney began conducting listeners' surveys to determine the average number of hours each radio receiver was turned on each day (in 1930, ten hours; in 1937, nine and a half); how many hours it was tuned to KGIR (in 1930, seven hours; in 1937, eight and a half); what the favorite programs were and why; and what suggestions for new programs and new sponsors listeners might have. The responses that have been preserved reveal a wealth of detail about the likes and dislikes of Butte's radio audience and the role that radio played in the lives of KGIR listeners during the darkest days of the Great Depression. For instance, Craney determined that jazz and old-time string-band melodies were Butte's favorite kind of music and that comedy programs eased the worries of economic hard times.<sup>16</sup>

Through the polls and the success of a few new programs, broadcasters and advertisers across the country discovered that during the Depression audiences wanted lighter fare than classical music and Department of Agriculture reports. The tremendous popularity of "Amos 'n' Andy" demonstrated the potential audience for comedy programs. Advertising agencies, who were producing most shows by the 1930s, experimented with transposing to radio many of the genres already present in popular literature—westerns, detective stories, serialized melodramas—as well as developing new formats like amateur hours and quiz shows.<sup>17</sup>

Soap operas, churned out in assembly-line style, dominated air time between ten o'clock in the morning and five o'clock at night. Criticized by some for encouraging neuroses in housewives,

15. On the amateur hour fad, see J. Fred MacDonald, *Don't Touch That Dial: Radio Programming in American Life, 1920-1960* (Chicago: Nelson-Hall, 1979), 47-48; Art Chappelle, interview with the author, Butte, Montana, July 29, 1988; Ray Schilling, interview with the author, Butte, Montana, August 31, 1988, Oral History Collection, Butte-Silver Bow Public Archives.

16. Listener Survey Reports, EBC Papers, 116-4, 3-9, 121-3.

17. Arthur Frank Wertheim, "Relieving Social Tensions: Radio Comedy and the Great Depression," *Journal of Popular Culture* 10 (Winter 1976): 501-519; MacDonald, *Don't Touch That Dial*, 27-29, 32, 39.



"washboard weepers" also had their defenders in those who interpreted them as morality plays, easily digested lessons in good and evil. A national study discovered that despite the far-fetched story lines, women found the serials useful sources of information regarding interpersonal relationships. Listeners drew from the dramas some "dos and don'ts" of child-rearing, dating, and marriage. They saw in the characters reflections of people in their own families, or they put themselves in analogous situations and hoped to pattern their behavior to attain similarly successful outcomes. One young woman who followed a soap opera argument between a jealous boy and his girlfriend, observed: "that is just like my boyfriend . . . listening to the stories like that makes me know how other girls act and listening to the way the girl argued I know how to tell my boyfriend where he can get off at." A Butte woman wrote KGIR that her favorite program was the serial "One Man's Family," because "I have a younger brother like Jack and I have grown to understand his ways listening to Jack and Claudia talk." Another testified about the same program: "it is a thirty-minute picture of American life that might as well have been taken in Butte."<sup>18</sup>

**H**istorians of radio have noted how directly and personally Americans responded to the new medium. Listeners welcomed broadcasters into their family circle; and through their letters to stations, fans created a democratic dialogue of praise, criticism, and suggestion in which they conveyed a sense of themselves as direct participants in the broadcast experience. Stations and the networks encouraged fans to correspond with them. During the early 1930s, more than two-thirds of all NBC programs explicitly requested audiences to write in, and the volume of mail was phenomenal. In 1926, NBC received 383,000 communications; in 1929, one million; and in 1931, seven million. CBS claimed that it received over twelve million pieces of mail in 1931.<sup>19</sup>

Much of the mail to stations during the 1930s was in response to free offers of prizes in exchange for a cereal box top or some other evidence of the purchase of a sponsor's product. Pictures of Little Orphan Annie, magnet rings, slide whistles, and

Tom Mix decoder rings kept the mail bags of America full during the Depression. During the 1937 Christmas season, KGIR offered a free prize for every letter to Santa Claus it received. For a seasonal program, selected letters were read on the air, interspersed with chatter between Santa and his helpers. After two such shows, the station had received three thousand letters and exhausted its grab bag. Hoping to slow the flow of mail, it asked that future letters include a sales receipt from a station advertiser. Three thousand more letters poured in. Broadcasters' invitations to the radio audience encouraged a letter-writing habit that ranged from participating in contests to conveying intimate thoughts and opinions to the President of the United States. Ed Craney confirmed that at times the largest volume of mail received by KGIR was in response to a program sponsored by the Farmers' Union, which discussed New Deal legislation and urged people to write to President Roosevelt.<sup>20</sup>

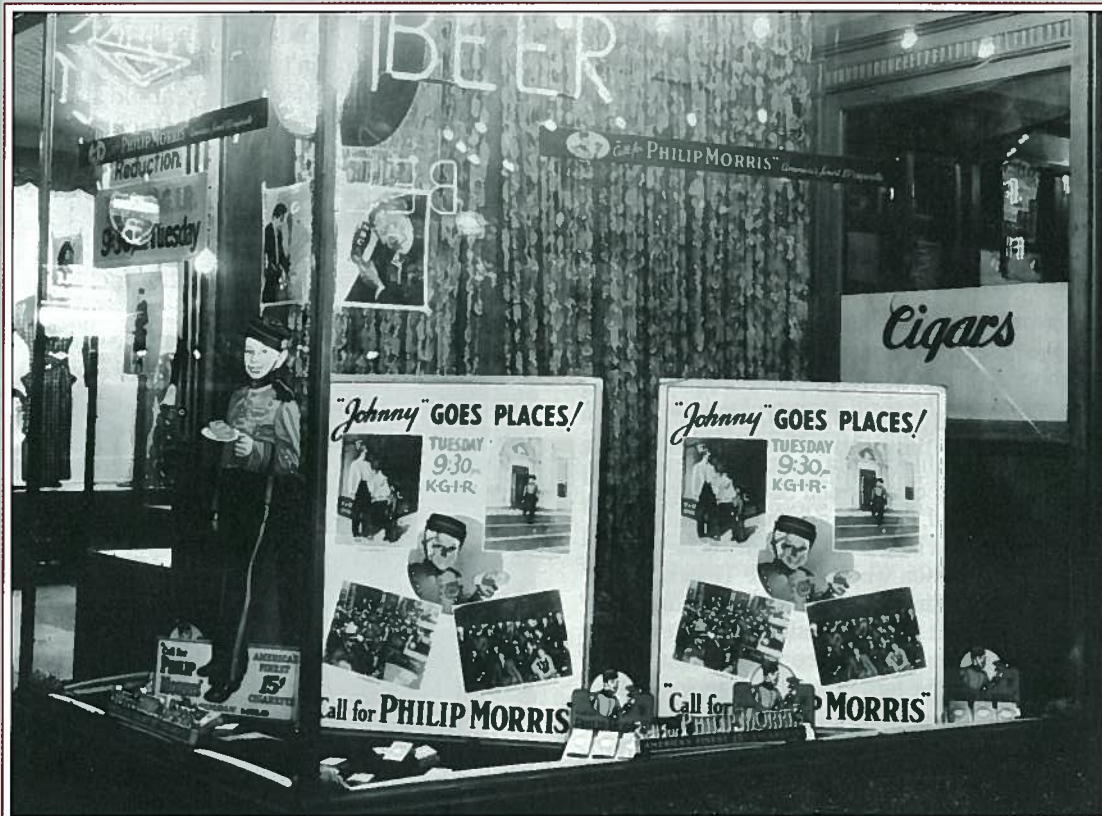
During the mid-1930s, KGIR kept a tally of the mail it received; 5,770 in 1934 and 23,065 in 1938. Butte women outnumbered men two to one as correspondents, paralleling national trends in which women outdistanced men who wrote radio fan mail. National studies also determined that lower income people and those with little education wrote the most letters to radio stations, radio stars, and advertisers. The small number of letters to KGIR that were saved, 165 of them from 1933 and 1935, tends to support that claim. Nevertheless, Butte was a working-class community, and it is natural that the majority of letters to KGIR would have come from working-class households. Of the 15,322 men employed in Butte in 1930, 62 per cent of them were engaged either in mining or manufacturing, in contrast to the 10 per cent employed as professionals or in clerical positions. Of those whose occupations could be determined, miners comprised 31 per cent of the adult males who wrote the letters preserved in KGIR's files. Of the remaining adult male writers, only one was in a management position. A few women married to professionals, managers, and business owners also sent their opinions to the station. Eighty per cent of the adult women writers, however, were wedded to working-class men or were themselves wage-earners.<sup>21</sup>

National studies estimated that the majority of letter-writers wrote to stations in response to contests. But KGIR correspondents sent as many unso-

18. MacDonald, *Don't Touch That Dial*, 248, 232-33; John Crosby, "Seven Deadly Sins of the Air," in *Television and Radio in American Life*, ed. Herbert L. Marx, Jr. (New York: The H. W. Wilson Company, 1953), 76-77; Thomas Meehan, "The 'Soaps' Fade But Do Not Die," in *Television and Radio*, ed. Poyntz Tyler (New York: The H. W. Wilson Company, 1961), 13-16; Paul F. Lazarfeld, *Radio and the Printed Page* (New York: Duell, Sloan and Pearce, 1940), 52-53; Virginia Anderson to KGIR, January 31, 1935, EBC Papers, 117-7; Mrs. Arthur Matteson to KGIR, January 28, 1935, EBC Papers, 117-9.

19. Roland Marchand has an especially good discussion of the personal identification audiences made with the radio. See his *Advertising the Dream*, 354-358. See also Leila A. Sussman, *Dear FDR: A Study of Political Letter-Writing* (Totowa, New Jersey: The Bedminster Press, 1963), 14.

20. Jim Harmon, *The Great Radio Heroes* (New York: Ace Books, 1967), 124-131; Marchand, *Advertising the Dream*, 305; Barnouw, *Tower in Babel*, 243; "Santa Claus" report, EBC Papers, 124-3; Sussman, *Dear FDR*, 11, 16, 113; Craney interview.



Advertisers successfully associated their products with popular radio programs and, for many listeners, the entertainment and sponsor became inseparable.

licited letters and replies to surveys that did not promise any material reward as they did to prize offers. During nine months in 1934, the station received 2,121 survey responses, compared to 2,071 responses to offers. In 1935, the number of letters seeking prizes was only 76 more than the 6,253 other letters received. Clearly, KGIR listeners believed that it was not only appropriate, but perhaps also necessary, to share their opinions with station management.<sup>22</sup>

Gratuitous advice, pungent criticism, and heartfelt best wishes accompanied both thoughtful and absurd suggestions. Some wrote to say that KGIR was the "only half-way decent program on the air," others to warn that it was playing too much jazz and should "crowd the trash off the air." George Hardesty, a carpenter, conveyed most eloquently the fondness that many listeners felt for their radios and

for KGIR. Writing in 1933, Hardesty described his radio as a powerful spur to the imagination and spoke of the relief it delivered during the psychologically bleak days of the 1930s:

There was a time when I saw a Movie twice a week, but not in these slim times. And with my radio, I really can't say that I mind so much. Any evening there are shows come to me over KGIR, but Wednesday evening when Sherlock Holmes unravels his mysteries, I am positive I don't miss my shows. I can see the two old gentlemen, as if they were in my room, poring over their G. Washington Coffee [the show's sponsor]. Certainly I am entirely unaware of a depression when one of these life and death mysteries is on, and honestly, anything that can make me do that is worth a lot. That's one of the reasons I like it, perhaps the main one.<sup>23</sup>

All over the country radio fans attested to the cheering effects of comedy and drama programs during the Depression, and the Butte audience was no exception. The character that elicited far and away the most responses from KGIR listeners was

21. KGIR Audience Mail Returns, 1933-1938, EBC Papers, 112-9; Sussman, *Dear FDR*, 143, 139; U.S. Department of Commerce, Bureau of the Census, *Fifteenth Census of the United States: 1930, Population, vol. IV, Occupations by States* (Washington, D.C.: Government Printing Office, 1933), 926-927. There are 165 listeners' letters in the KGIR collection from 1933 to 1935. I was able to determine the occupation of 111 writers or, in the case of married women and children, the occupations of their husbands or fathers through the 1934 and 1936 Butte City Directory. No directories were published in 1933 and 1935.

22. KGIR Audience Mail Returns, 1933-1938, EBC Papers, 112-9.  
23. Mrs. D. E. Strah to KGIR, November 6, 1937, EBC Papers, 116-4; B. E. Lyons to KGIR, February 1, 1933, and George Hardesty to KGIR, n.d., EBC Papers, 117-7.



Ed Wynn's "Fire Chief," sponsored by Texaco. Fans wrote: "He will cure the worst case of the Blues and even make you forget the Depression"; "Ed sure keeps the entire radio audience in an uproar from start to finish, which is just what is needed by all of us during these trying times . . ."; "It is humorous and produces a *'good laugh'* which I consider necessary to offset the serious problems of this strenuous life of ours." Wynn's show provoked some poignant compositions on the part of fans. Young Harry Lonner sent in this dispatch:

A dance orchestra is on the air. Dad is reading the newspaper. Ma is busy with some sewing or other household task. Sis and I are doing schoolwork. Suddenly, comes the shrill scream of a siren! The clang of bells! Ed Wynn is on the air! Dad lets the newspaper drop in his lap, Ma comes into the parlor and sits close to the radio; and Sis and I stop our schoolwork . . . Dad, Sis and I grin and chuckle after every joke, but Ma laughs till her sides ache. This is the one big reason why I like the Texaco Program. For fifteen minutes Dad forgets about his job, Ma quits worrying about how she is going to pay the bills, and I am happy to see them happy. Old Man Depression is forgotten and Happiness is King.<sup>24</sup>

Time and again writers expressed gratitude that they had been able to buy their radios during good times, because now they were their only source of pleasure and news. Using empathy and imagination, radio listeners transported themselves, however briefly, from their surroundings. Listening to the travails of Little Orphan Annie made "our troubles so small compared to our more unfortunate fellow beings." The radio compensated those not able to travel during the vacation season—even though unemployment guaranteed "most of us are having quite a long vacation"—by taking them to the Mountains of the Moon or the jungles of Malaya and Africa. And the radio was democratic. As Ted Wilson, a clerk at Southside Hardware, remarked: "it is a A one entertainment equally alluring for the rich or poor."<sup>25</sup>

**B**y the 1930s, radio had become part of many people's daily lives, a companion that did more than lift the blues of the Depression. Mrs. George McCoy wrote KGIR that the comedy of an early morning show, "The Gazooks," along with three cups of coffee "make it

possible to face the horrors of the new day with a smile." Mrs. Nellie Sacry chronicled a day "beginning with the Gazooks—who help us get up better natured for you can't be grumpy when someone makes you laugh." Her eight-year-old son waited at the door with his coat on to dash out to school as soon as "Cecil and Sally" was over, and the family's day continued through the "Music Box" at dinner time. Mrs. George Hardesty praised the sweet music that calmed her frayed nerves after a day of housework and made her "a better me, to meet my husband and family."<sup>26</sup>

Radio fans took programs far more seriously and invested them with more importance than advertising men or writers ever imagined. They accepted radio almost uncritically, as a wise seer who provided advice, pleasure, and testimonials for reliable products. Listeners wrote amazingly innocent and intimate letters to fictional characters and national corporations. Mrs. J. W. Larson, a miner's wife, lauded a children's program sponsored by General Mills:

Personally, Skippy's program has helped me a great deal. My little girl is four years old, she can't tell time yet, but she never lets me forget Skippy. Skippy has taught her to brush her own hair and not to forget to clean her theeth [*sic*] and fingernails. Before Skippy was on the air I couldn't get her to eat any cereal, but now I have no trouble. She don't get Wheaties very often now, as her father isn't working. But she eats her oatmeal every morning. She had Wheaties every morning when her Dad was working.<sup>27</sup>

Craney's calls during the 1930s for new programs and sponsors elicited a wide variety of suggestions and documented the energy and thought that many listeners put into "their station." More than one person thought a show relating tales of Butte and Montana history would be entertaining. Mrs. T. H. Wilkinson suggested having pioneers relate their experiences of settling the area or perhaps retelling some tales of hunting and fishing. "After all," she concluded, "Butte is a good old town and just full of good stories to tell." H. C. Howard proposed a different way of exploring Montana, a series of "short enthusiastic talks" recounting the "delights of motoring in Montana and describing each week some historical or scenic spot that is little known in the state and describing how it is reached, the condition of the roads to this spot and various points of interest along the route." The show would be accompanied by popular music and paid for by

24. Kathryn Combo to KGIR, n.d., Floyd Ball to KGIR, February 1, 1933, J. W. Macom to KGIR, February 1, 1933, Harry Lonner to KGIR, n.d., EBC Papers, 117-7.

25. Gertrude McCarthy to KGIR, n.d., EBC Papers, 117-9; Helen Anderson to KGIR, n.d., Ted Wilson to KGIR, February 1, 1933, EBC Papers, 117-7.

26. Mrs. George McCoy to KGIR, February 2, 1933, Nellie Sacry to KGIR, February 1, 1933, Mrs. George Hardesty to KGIR, n.d., EBC Papers, 3-9.

27. Mrs. J. W. Larson to KGIR, February 1, 1933, EBC Papers, 3-9.

28. Mildred Nelson to KGIR, February 2, 1933, Mrs. T. H. Wilkinson to KGIR, n.d., H. C. Howard to KGIR, February 2, 1933, EBC Papers, 3-9.



Edmund B. Craney is shown here in the 1930s, just after the condenser microphone he is using came into vogue.

service stations, hotels, auto camps, or businesses patronized by tourists.<sup>28</sup>

Housewives recommended programs that would interest them during the day: a morning exercise routine, advice to young housekeepers on arranging furniture, reports on new clothing styles, a menu contest of meals "that the average housewife could afford to serve." From Mrs. Adah Daugherty, wife of a salesman, came a letter that could have gotten her a job in any advertising agency:

There are things dear to the heart of every woman, and dearest of these is her personal appearance. If

29. Mrs. Ada E. Green to KGIR, February 1, 1933, Mrs. Bruce E. Dalton to KGIR, February 1, 1933, Mrs. Fred Everinghaus to KGIR, February 6, 1933, EBC Papers, 3-9; Mrs. A. R. Grenon to KGIR, February 1, 1932, EBC Papers, 122-7; Mrs. Adah Daugherty to KGIR, n.d., EBC Papers, 3-9.

30. Mrs. Henry Webking to KGIR, n.d., EBC Papers, 3-9; Margaret Carolus to KGIR, February 4, 1935, EBC Papers, 117-9; Clarence Roper to KGIR, n.d., Ruth O'Brien to KGIR, February 1, 1933, EBC Papers, 117-7.

she could go to the radio and tune in on a beauty talk that would deal with any phase of a woman's face, hair, figure, hands, and feet, I dare say that only the door bell could draw her away. These things she might be able to get in the advertisements in the current magazines, or an occasional article, but the busy woman has very little time for reading. There is a psychological difference between reading the printed word, and hearing the same spoken. The latter catches the instant attention and is retained longer. With this given by some firm or firms in Butte, and the talk read by a woman, it would prove most effective.

Mrs. Daugherty continued with a discussion of possible sponsors and a reflection on the future of advertising: "Radio is the new means of advertising, and is here to stay. More and more firms are going to adopt clever methods of advertising, and owing to the depression, more vigorous methods." She acknowledged that the intrinsic worth of the product was immaterial and that by appealing to women's vanity a manufacturer could successfully peddle anything. "Woman is eternally looking for the fountain of youth . . . she will be a susceptible listener to a program on beauty talks, and the firm to which she is listening will be the one to gain." And in words reminiscent of the personal testimony advertisements that were popular in magazines of the time, she concluded: "I am a woman. I know."<sup>29</sup>

**M**rs. Daugherty was unusual in analyzing the advertising industry's relationship to radio with such perspicacity. The overwhelming majority of listeners who wrote to the station and mentioned sponsors conveyed a simple gratitude that corporations were providing them with so many hours of delight. Some avowed they enjoyed the advertising as much as the programming. Mrs. Henry Webking claimed that "the K.G.I.R. announcer tells us so much about the firm and its products during the course of the program, and in so few well chosen words, that we really enjoy the advertising and absorb it as much as we do the request numbers." Fans appeared to feel that the least they could do to demonstrate their appreciation was to buy the sponsor's product. Margaret Carolus, who enjoyed the Jack Benny program

31. Robert S. Lynd and Helen Merrell Lynd, *Middletown: A Study in Modern American Culture* (New York: Harcourt, Brace & World, 1929), 271; Dorothy M. Johnson, "The Small-Town World Before Radio," *Montana, the Magazine of Western History* 24 (Spring 1974): 53; Harmon, *Radio Heroes*, 251; Schilling interview.

32. Mona Daly to the author, August 3, 1988; Jacob Jovick to the author, August 7, 1988.

33. Richards, "History of Broadcasting," 105; May Gates to KGIR, October 10, 1930, Bugle news announcement, September 1930, EBC Papers, 114-8.



paid for by Jello, found the advertising so compelling "that it has encouraged me to eat and like Jello—though I had never cared for it before." Clarence Roper testified that smoking Edgeworth tobacco gave him as much of a thrill as the music on the Edgeworth program. Ruth O'Brien begged KGIR to "keep Orphan Annie on the radio for a little ten-year-old like me" and promised, "I'll drink lots and lots of Ovaltine."<sup>30</sup>

Such promises and testimonials are weighty evidence of the power that advertisers exerted on the radio audience. Craney's device for generating new ideas may have provided the kernels for only a few marketable programs, but it reaped a harvest of radio fans participating actively in their own seduction by consumer culture. The lure of winning a prize coaxed them into experimenting with the language of sales, extolling the virtues of any and all products. The impetus of a contest may have led listeners to embellish their appreciation of certain products, but the internal structure of their letters, the way in which they linked product use to their daily lives, and the effort by which men, women, and children sat down to write lengthy missives—often much longer than that required or desired by contest rules—testify to the earnestness with which most correspondents wrote.

When Helen and Robert Lynd observed the popularity of radio in Middletown in the early 1920s, they also hypothesized that radio, along with national advertising and syndicated newspapers, would act to standardize much of Middletown's culture. Writer Dorothy Johnson certainly found that to be the case in Montana:

Everybody, all over, could listen to the same demagogues, howl at the same comedians, make a fad of the new slang. Everybody with a radio . . . suddenly was sophisticated, part of the great outside world. . . . Listeners became addicts, so accustomed to having sounds of any old kind coming into the house that they were nervous when it was quiet. . . . For better or worse, the quiet, the isolation, the parochialism was gone.

KGIR brought those forces of homogenization to Butte. Yet, throughout the 1930s, the station continued to air programs that spotlighted local talent, that extolled the unique virtues of the Montana landscape, that caused listeners to feel an allegiance to their local station—not only gratitude to national sponsors. As much as fans appreciated syndicated shows, they loved listening to themselves and their neighbors more. Jim Harmon declared that "the very stuff of radio was imagination," and KGIR permitted citizens to let their imaginations run riot. Symons's amateur hour nourished the dreams of local performers. Neighbors guessed at the hidden

messages conveyed by songs on the request hour. Families gathered around the radio to listen to their sons and daughters sing, play in jazz bands, and recite poetry. Members of Butte's different ethnic communities waited for special holiday programs that featured their musical heritage. Private delights, broadcast over the air, assumed a cloak of public importance.<sup>31</sup>

The effect that radio had on listeners is evident in the long and pleasurable memories that people associate with KGIR. Mona Daly "vividly" recalled in 1988 the afternoon in the 1930s on which her voice teacher at the Webster school chose her and a classmate to go to the KGIR studio and sing a duet of "Juanita"—"a definite thrill." Fifty years after he first heard the melodies, Jacob Jovick could name eighty-one songs that KGIR played on the request hour and thirty-one different programs that he listened to and apologize because "there were others I don't recall."<sup>32</sup>

**E**d Craney, his small staff, and the KGIR audience composed a score that harmonized strains of local, regional, and national culture. Craney had hoped that radio would make Montanans "realize that there was more in Montana than the little town that they lived in." To gain that end, he invited Montanans' participation in his enterprise. Miss May Gates of Opportunity was one of twenty-four would-be news editors who volunteered their services to pass on the tidings of their communities to the KGIR audience. KGIR's listeners thus had access not only to national news, New York opera, and southern string-band music, but also to "all the news and gossip that is told each evening at the Opportunity store"—and in stores in Butte, Melrose, Rocker, Deer Lodge, Twin Bridges, and a handful of other communities in KGIR's broadcast radius. KGIR introduced its audience to nationally standardized programs that some analysts feared would erase the cultural diversity of America. The station's commitment to airing the voices of its own region, however, guaranteed a medley of cultural expression. Listeners greeted radio's first decade in Butte with uncritical pleasure. KGIR became a source of delight, education, and emotional relief to thousands weathering the Great Depression, and May Gates spoke for many when she exclaimed, "What a wonderful invention the radio has been."<sup>33</sup>

MARY MURPHY is the former head of the Butte-Silver Bow Public Archives at Butte and is on the history faculty at the University of Wyoming at Laramie. In 1987, Murphy received the James H. Bradley Fellowship, awarded by the Montana Historical Society, which helped fund the research for this article.



Clark Kellett was one of many KGIR announcers who entertained Butte listeners from the KGIR control room during the 1930s.