

## ABSTRACT

Title of Document: EDYTHE MESERAND: RADIO PIONEER  
AND FIRST PRESIDENT OF AMERICAN  
WOMEN IN RADIO AND TELEVISION

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This historical dissertation examines the career of Edythe Meserand, a broadcast executive and the first president of American Women in Radio and Television, the oldest established professional association dedicated to advancing women in broadcasting. The research – the first in-depth account of Meserand’s professional life – uses primary sources to investigate the tactics Meserand used to build a successful career in broadcasting’s early decades, from the mid-1920s through the early 1950s. Her strategies reflected both her times and the conservative nature of the broadcasting industry. Much of her work took place in the gendered space that women typically occupied, but her most important work occurred during the fifteen years she spent in the male-dominated newsroom at WOR radio. This research adds to the historical record by providing a comprehensive case study of a notable woman whose career sheds light on the range of challenges and opportunities women faced. It also explores the prominent role she played in the founding and early development

of AWRT where she inspired and mentored other women for more than 30 years. The author will argue that this work, and Meserand's ability to position herself as a worthy role-model for women in the broadcasting and media industry, is her most significant contribution.

EDYTHE MESERAND:  
RADIO PIONEER AND FIRST PRESIDENT OF AMERICAN WOMEN IN  
RADIO AND TELEVISION

By

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## Dedication

For my mother, Dorothy, my father, Kenneth,  
and for my husband, Tom

## Acknowledgements

A journey of a thousand miles begins with a single step.

**Lao-tzu,**  
*Chinese philosopher (604 BC - 531 BC)*

The trail winding through this long dissertation process has often felt like a journey of a thousand miles. There were countless moments when I doubted my ability to reach a successful conclusion. But on each of those occasions, someone stepped in to sooth a worried mind, pull me back on track, offer a helpful suggestion, and encourage me to follow the dream. Their generous assistance has allowed me, finally, to arrive at this point.

I wasn't planning to pursue a Ph.D. when I met with former Dean Tom Kunkel in 2006. I simply wanted to talk about adjunct teaching opportunities. He encouraged me to meet with the then-director of the Doctoral Program, Dr. Carol Rogers. Her warm welcome and encouraging words led to a meeting with Professor Maurine Beasley, whose enthusiastic support would become my guiding light through this incredible adventure. Tom, Carol and Maurine are the people most responsible for my being here. My thanks to them for opening a new door, and to the Scripps Howard Foundation for providing a generous fellowship to support my studies.

Historical research surely has something in common with detective work. Discovery of one item inevitably leads to a search down half a dozen new trails. For me, this portion of the journey was more accessible, more interesting, and ultimately, more successful because of the gracious assistance of the staff at the Library of

American Broadcasting, now part of the Special Collections in Mass Media and Culture at the University of Maryland. I am grateful to Chuck Howell, the chief curator for the collection, to Laura Schnitker, and most especially to Michael Henry, who unfailingly guided me through their remarkable holdings. No request was too small ... no question, too obscure for Mike's careful attention. Thank you all. You preside over a hidden gem.

Many professors at the Merrill College of Journalism offered guidance, friendship and support. In particular, I am indebted to the late Dr. Lee Thornton who understood the challenges involved when transitioning from the profession to the academy. Lee was a wise and generous friend. I am also deeply indebted to the late Haynes Johnson. I learned so much during the two years I worked with him as his graduate assistant. He was the most generous of mentors and a wonderful counselor.

I am grateful to my cohort mates, Matt Bates, Megan Fromm, Sonia Pedrosa Pereira and Lindsey Wotanis. I cannot imagine how I would have survived the early challenges of this process without their support and their friendship. A special thank-you to Dr. Lindsey who became the dearest of friends, and never stopped believing that I could finish this journey.

My dissertation committee deserves and will always have my enduring respect and gratitude. Dr. Douglas Gomery is a master historian of the media and culture industries. He retired from active teaching at about the same time I entered the Ph.D. program. How lucky for me that he was willing to endure yet another dissertation process. I am fortunate to have had his encouragement and wise counsel. Dr. Gay Gullickson reminded me, in more ways than she can know, of the joy that comes

from continuous learning. Her rich knowledge of women's history is an inspiration, and her willingness to share insight and to stimulate thinking makes her an extraordinary teacher and educator. I've already tagged Dr. Carol Rogers as one of those most responsible for my being here today. From the beginning, and throughout this occasionally rocky journey, she has been a steady guide and a continuing source of encouragement. I'm so glad I managed to complete the journey before she rides off into the retirement sunset. I consider Dr. Linda Steiner the "scholar's scholar." I am grateful for the opportunity to learn from and study with her. I admire her intellectual curiosity, which seems to know no bounds. Conversations with her were always enlightening.

I cannot begin to express adequate thanks to my remarkable adviser, Dr. Maurine Beasley. I could not have made it through this journey without her help. Her reputation as a celebrated and respected scholar of media history is well-known. Her status as perhaps the foremost historian of women in journalism made her the best possible guide for this research. All of my work benefited from her suggestions, her questions and her advice. Professor Beasley seems to have the ability to strike the perfect balance in leading her students through the dissertation process. Her counsel can take the form of a subtle nudge, or, when needed, a more direct prod, but it always arrives with her characteristic attention and enthusiasm. She is a tireless mentor, a generous adviser and an inspirational woman. I am so fortunate to have worked with her. This is the twenty-fifth dissertation that she has directed. Now I can join the select group of her students who are proud to call themselves "Beasley Girls."

To my family, near and far, I will forever be grateful for your encouragement and your endless patience throughout this long journey. Joan Heaps welcomed my late mother into her home and provided a safe and comfortable place for her during Mom's final years. Thank you, Joan. Dr. Lisa Smith and Dr. Jeff Smith were a continuous source of helpful advice, and enthusiastic support. My son, Dr. Steven Flammia, kept me focused on the goal. Years ago, he told me I could do this. Neither of us thought it would take this long. My daughter Karen Harriman and her husband Troy have seen, first hand, the challenges that arise in the final stages of this process. They have helped to keep me grounded in these last months and have been unfailing in their support. Valentina Baccetti is halfway around the world, but she and I have travelled parallel paths, and now have something to celebrate together. I am so happy that she has also concluded her doctoral work. Major celebration is definitely in order!

Finally, to my husband, Tom Flammia, my deepest thanks for giving me the time and space to run this course. You have endured every step of this journey which sometimes seemed like an endless trek. I know it has been difficult. I know I have tested your patience. Through all the joys and challenges, I have always felt your loving support. Now, here we are. I couldn't love you more.

## Table of Contents

Dedication.....	ii
Acknowledgements.....	iii
Table of Contents.....	vii
List of Figures.....	ix
Chapter 1: Scope and Purpose.....	1
Chapter 2: Literature Review and Theoretical Perspective.....	11
Edythe Meserand in the Literature.....	12
Women in Radio in the Literature.....	15
The Emergence of News on Radio.....	20
Methods Employed and Theoretical Approach.....	22
Primary Source Material.....	26
Chapter 3: History and Context.....	29
Early Radio and Women's Place.....	31
The 1930s – A Maturing Medium and a Developing Career.....	33
Early News and the Impact of War.....	36
War Changes Everything.....	41
Chapter 4: Early Life and Career of Edythe Meserand.....	47
The Long Journey to a New Life.....	49
1926 – A Network and a Career are Born.....	53
The Key Roles of Women in Meserand's Early Career.....	58
Starting Over on the Local Radio Stage.....	63
A Brief Diversion and a Famous Name.....	67
Chapter 5: The WOR Days.....	73
The Department Store Connection.....	75
The Clear Channel Advantage.....	77
A Network of its Own.....	79
WOR's Growing Audience.....	81
Climbing the Career Ladder from the Ground Up.....	82
Crossing the Gender Divide into the Radio Newsroom.....	85
Greater Responsibility and a New Role.....	88
Meeting the Growing Demand for News.....	91
Women Advance in Wartime Radio.....	94
Maintaining the News Commitment.....	102
The "Golden Mike".....	109
A Taste of Television.....	111
Chapter 6: Association of Women Broadcasters: The First Organization for Women in Broadcasting, 1942-1951.....	113
Meserand and the Woman's Place in Broadcasting.....	115
Expanding Roles for Women in Radio.....	117
Finding a Place for Women in the National Association of Broadcasters.....	121
The "Ladies Auxiliary".....	124
Finding an Identity and Defining a Role for AWB.....	127

“Rumblings” for Change and the Break from NAB .....	131
Planning for a New, Independent Women’s Group .....	136
Chapter 7: The Early Years of AWRT and Edythe Meserand’s Post-Broadcasting Life .....	141
Building an Organization from the Ground Up .....	145
Leadership to Build “A Firm Foundation” .....	148
“What AWRT Can Do for You” .....	154
Assessing AWRT’s Inaugural Year .....	157
The End of a Career in Daily Broadcasting .....	163
Starting a New Life .....	166
In the Media Business, Again .....	170
Maintaining the AWRT Connection through Changing Times .....	173
Meserand’s Final Career Move .....	177
Chapter 8: Conclusions .....	181
Constructing a Career and Confronting Gender Issues .....	182
Navigating the Broadcasting Industry’s Changing Waters .....	187
Seizing an Opportunity – Crafting a New Role .....	190
A Reluctant Feminist, Somewhat Transformed .....	192
Meserand’s Career as an Example for Women .....	196
Capstone on a Professional Life .....	199
Suggestions for Future Research .....	201
Bibliography .....	205



## List of Figures

- Figure 1 Ship manifest from the trans-Atlantic crossing of the *Martha Washington*. Palermo, Italy to New York, June, 1911.
- Figure 2 Edythe Meserand's NBC Employee Building Pass, 1930.
- Figure 3 Edythe Meserand as the "Musical Clock" girl at WGBS radio, 1932.
- Figure 4 Edythe Meserand publicity photograph, circa late 1930's.
- Figure 5 Morse code "study sheet," 1942.
- Figure 6 "Victory" or V-mail, 1943.
- Figure 7 Edythe Meserand at her desk in the WOR News and Special Features Department, circa mid-1940's.
- Figure 8 Edythe Meserand, surrounded by some of the donations received for the 1946 WOR Christmas Children's Fund.
- Figure 9 Edythe Meserand with two other newly-elected officers of American Women in Radio and Television, April, 1951.
- Figure 10 Edythe Meserand publicity photograph, circa 1951.
- Figure 11 "News and Views," American Women in Radio and Television newsletter, September, 1951.
- Figure 12 Farewell card presented to Edythe Meserand by her newsroom colleagues when she left WOR in 1952.

## Chapter 1: Scope and Purpose

The fall of 1926 was a momentous period in the history of American broadcasting. The era of network radio that began with the formation of the National Broadcasting Company would help define and shape the contours of the U.S. broadcasting system for years to come. The launch of NBC would also prove pivotal for a young woman whose ambition and determination would lead her to a decades-long broadcasting career. Edythe Meserand worked behind the scenes, largely without notice. Hers is only one of many stories that have eluded the researchers' gaze, but it provides an enlightening illustration of the opportunities and obstacles facing women who moved into the field. Women were far more involved in the formative years of radio than many accounts of broadcast history would suggest, however, the women whose names are most familiar were the radio stars ... the actresses, singers, comediennes, commentators and hostesses who entertained the growing radio audience.<sup>1</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> The names of Vaughn DeLeath, Jessica Dragonette, Kate Smith, Gertrude Berg, Gracie Allen, and Mary Margaret McBride, among others, were fixtures in radio program schedules published daily in the nation's newspapers. Their faces appeared on the covers of a new genre of radio fan magazines. Detailed accounts of their work on radio may be found in many accounts of broadcasting history, including E.P.J. Shurick, *The First Quarter Century of American Broadcasting* (Kansas City: Midland Publishing, 1946), especially Chapter 7, "The Women's Role in Broadcasting," 140-151; 22-50 and Donna Halper *Invisible Stars* (Armonk, NY: M.E. Sharpe, 2001), Chapter 2, "the Late 1920's: A Time of Contradictions," and Chapter 3 "The 1930's: The Women Behind the Men," 51-94; J. Fred MacDonald *Don't Touch That Dial* (Chicago: Nelson Hall, 1979), especially Chapter 1, "History of Broadcasting," Chapter 2, "The Emergence of Radio Programming," and Chapter 3, "Radio's Early Network Years. Accessed online on various dates. <http://jfredmacdonald.com/prologue.htm>

Meserand's entry into broadcasting at the just-formed NBC network provided her with an extraordinary vantage point into the fledgling industry as it was evolving into an important economic and social force in the United States. Her professional journey through a variety of roles in both network and local radio operations put her in contact with most aspects of the emerging broadcasting business, leading her to claim, many years later, that she "grew up with the industry."<sup>2</sup> From 1926 until 1937, she worked variously as a secretary, a clerk, a press aide and publicist ... positions which were not uncommon for a woman working out of the public view. Eventually, she followed a path that crossed the workplace gender divide, winding up as an executive in the WOR radio newsroom.

By the time Meserand began work at WOR in 1937, the radio industry had survived the economic tumult of the Depression and matured into an increasingly profitable business. A widening array of programming offerings and more sophisticated production techniques made radio one of America's favorite leisure time activities ... this was considered by many, its "Golden Age." For Meserand, the timing proved critical, as radio was about to take on a new mission. News broadcasts, which had not been a major component on program schedules, were becoming an essential fixture. World War II marked the entry point for hundreds of thousands of women into the American workforce; for Edythe Meserand, it opened a new door of opportunity. As an original member of the News and Special Features unit created at WOR, she was directly involved in organizing one of the country's first local radio newsrooms. When the department's mission shifted and its title was changed to War

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<sup>2</sup> Meserand speech to Capital District chapter of AWRT, 1 October, 1976, Box 10, Folder 1, Edythe Meserand Papers, Library of American Broadcasting.

Services and News in 1941, Meserand played a central role in the development of information programming as it was expanded to satisfy the increasing war-time audience demand.

Meserand's career journey through much of broadcasting's early terrain also took her briefly into television. Her role as a newsroom executive and her work as the writer and producer of special feature and public affairs programs on radio expanded in 1949 when WOR-TV went on the air. This was an especially prolific and satisfying period for Meserand; she had a position of authority at one of the best known and highly regarded stations in the country; she was doing work she loved: conceiving, writing and producing radio and television programs. In addition, her stature within the industry led to her election as the first president of American Women in Radio and Television (AWRT), the first independent organization created to support and serve the professional community of women in broadcasting. By all accounts, she relished her professional success.

Nevertheless, Meserand's career in daily broadcasting ended in 1952. She was among a large group of WOR employees who were dismissed amid a major corporate restructuring. The determined and ambitious woman who had grown accustomed to the daily stresses of life in a busy newsroom now faced what was, perhaps even more challenging: an unknown future. Not only was she out of work, but by this time her term as AWRT president had come to an end. Meserand's initial instinct was to turn away from her professional past, and indeed she never again worked in day-to-day broadcasting. However, she was able to reposition herself in another media arena, opening up her own advertising and public relations firm. And

through her continuing association with AWRT, she crafted a place as a role model and mentor who would be an advocate for women in the media professions throughout her life.

Edythe Meserand's career journey is the centerpiece for this research. Yet, in the course of examining her path, the research also provides a glimpse behind the scenes of early radio, and offers insight into gender relations. In addition, her professional life is considered against the backdrop of expanding and contracting radio workplace roles available to women. Meserand's most important work took place at WOR radio, just prior to and during World War II. When faced with a choice between press relations and news, she chose the latter. That move into the newsroom would put her on a trail that, at that point, was not well traveled by women. Although she was not a broadcast journalist in a traditional sense, Meserand's work during this tumultuous period offers a glance into the emergence of radio journalism, especially at the local station level, an area almost entirely overlooked in the literature.

Meserand was part of a relatively small but significant cohort of women who worked behind the scenes in positions of responsibility, and who had the authority to directly impact radio programming. Two of these women, Bertha Brainard and Margaret Cuthbert were early role models and mentors to Meserand. Their examples served as a continuous touchstone in her later work as a leader and representative for professional women in broadcasting.

Meserand's career intertwines with some of the most extraordinary developments in the life and culture of the United States in the twentieth century: a

technological earthquake as the new medium of radio takes hold, the political earthquakes of the Great Depression and World War II, and the cultural earthquake of women moving into new social and workplace roles. Feminism seemed of little interest to Meserand, especially in her early career. Her life in broadcasting was spent in a gendered workspace; she encountered gender-based obstacles, and on a number of occasions, she was the victim of sexual harassment. Yet, she succeeded in navigating a path through the overwhelmingly male-dominated newsroom, largely by minimizing the issue and working hard to fit in. Meserand's attitudes toward feminism or feminist issues appeared to evolve in her later life as she positioned herself as a champion for women in the media workplace. Nevertheless, she presents a complicated picture of a woman adapting to her changing times, celebrating women's accomplishments, but shunning the feminist label.

With this dissertation, I aim to contribute to the scholarship on the history of women in broadcasting by excavating the unexplored story of one notable woman's career. Along with those of many other women, Edythe Meserand's story has been lost or marginalized. As Michelle Hilmes has explained, "history writing has consigned women to the sidelines, not historical events themselves."<sup>3</sup> This inevitably leads to the critical question of why this woman's life deserves our attention. Meserand carved a niche for herself in the unfamiliar and unfriendly territory of the early radio newsroom. Over time, this would become a place where women would be welcomed, even though she did little to expand women's opportunities at the time.

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<sup>3</sup> Michelle Hilmes, *Radio Voices: American Broadcasting, 1922-1952* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1997), 132.

The arena for her greatest influence would come later, through her AWRT work, and her life-long commitment to support and expand opportunities for women in media.

This case study exploring Edythe Meserand's professional life leads to a number of questions: How did Edythe Meserand create a successful career in the early decades of broadcasting, despite the gender barriers facing women? How did she adapt to changes in the industry over time? What qualities propelled Meserand to a leadership role in American Women in Radio and Television (AWRT), an organization designed to elevate women in broadcasting? Finally, how did she present herself as a role model in her efforts to influence women in media industries and to what degree was she successful?

This research is based largely on primary sources: Meserand's personal papers, which are part of the Broadcast Pioneers archive in the Special Collections repository at the University of Maryland, her speeches, oral histories, and interviews with several of her family members and friends.

Seven chapters follow this brief introduction. Chapter two reviews the limited body of literature that addresses Meserand's broadcasting career, and the more extensive body of existing work on the opportunities and limitations for women in early broadcasting. It also examines the literature on the emergence of news as a program element. Finally, chapter two describes this study's historical method and the theoretical perspective employed.

Chapter three provides some history and context for this study by elaborating on the changing roles played by women in radio's development, and the important changes in the medium's growth and influence, especially in the arena of news and

public affairs during World War II. Particular attention will be paid to the state of local radio in New York City, the nation's largest media market where Meserand worked for nearly thirty years.

Unanticipated discoveries about Meserand's upbringing are explored in Chapter four, which also includes an examination of the first decade of her broadcasting career. In 1926, at the age of seventeen, she had no particular career goals when she went to work for the newly formed NBC Radio Network. Nevertheless, in this setting Meserand formed important relationships that would prove critical in her future development. Her first boss, Johnny Johnstone, became a lifelong mentor and friend who she would work with again at WOR Radio. It was also at NBC where Meserand met two women who had a powerful influence on her professional aspirations. The first was Bertha Brainard who, as program director for the network, was responsible for development of new programming ideas and hiring the talent to perform. She was one of the most powerful female figures during radio's formative years. The other notable woman was Margaret Cuthbert, whose career at NBC included being director of women's programming and director of talks. Cuthbert was among the small group of women, which included Meserand, involved in the initial planning for the organization that became American Women in Radio and Television. It was in that context that she had the most profound influence on Meserand, who said she never would have gotten involved in the organization had it not been for Cuthbert's personal request. The importance of this relationship will also be discussed in Chapter six.



The next two stops along Edythe Meserand's career track carried her through a series of posts that fit generally within the range of roles considered appropriate for women. That trajectory changed after she went to work at WOR and it is this period of her life, from 1937 through the early 1950s, examined in Chapter five, that represents the most productive, and for purposes of this research, the most important portion of Meserand's career.

She was hired, first, as a clerk in the radio station's press operation, a position with little responsibility and of no particular interest to her. She was eventually promoted to a spot in the Special Features unit where her career took a dramatic turn on the day in the early fall of 1939 when England declared war on Germany.<sup>4</sup> In the absence of a fully-constituted news department, a number of radio station employees, including Meserand, were recruited to assist in keeping listeners up to date on the latest developments. This momentous occasion propelled Meserand onto a new professional path. It is an examination of this journey which constitutes the core of this study. At a time when there were very few women working as radio executives or behind the scenes in radio news departments, Meserand seized the moment and established herself as "a newswoman among men."<sup>5</sup>

Edythe Meserand regularly described herself as an unabashed opponent of women's organizations. It was not surprising, then, that she was a reluctant participant when, on orders from her station manager, she was required to attend meetings of an industry-sponsored group, the Association of Women Broadcasters

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<sup>4</sup> September 3, 1939

<sup>5</sup> Inscribed on a hand-made card given to Meserand on the occasion of her departure from WOR Radio. It was signed by the 17 men who worked in the newsroom. Box 1 Folder 4. She was also given a typewriter charm with a tiny slip of paper inserted into the roller which read "We love you." Box 1, Folder 9. Edythe Meserand papers, Library of American Broadcasting.

(AWB). This organization, and its evolution into the first independent professional group for women in the radio industry, is explored in Chapter six. This section of the research will examine the conflicted picture of women's opportunities, expanding as the industry grew in scope and influence, but still largely constrained by the same gender segregation that kept women on the margins of power. Chapter seven investigates the founding and early work of this new organization, American Women in Radio and Television (AWRT) and the key role Meserand played in the organization that was formed to provide "a medium of exchange of ideas which will help women become greater commercial assets to their stations ... and to increase women's opportunities to be of service to the broadcasting industry as a whole."<sup>6</sup> This reluctant participant in any organized women's group served for a year as AWRT's first national president and remained active in the group's activities throughout her life. Opportunities for women in broadcasting expanded dramatically during the period from the organization's founding in 1951 until Meserand's death in 1997. This chapter will examine how she endeavored to broaden these opportunities by transforming herself into a vocal and visible advocate for women in broadcasting and related fields. It also explores the last phase of Meserand's professional life when she moved out of daily broadcasting, but remained in the broad media universe as head of her own public relations, marketing and advertising firm.

Chapter eight summarizes conclusions drawn from this research and offers an assessment of Meserand's ability to navigate the challenges facing women in broadcasting's early decades. Her career shows that gender barriers were high but

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<sup>6</sup> There are numerous accounts of the fledgling group's objectives. This one comes from a January, 1951 article in *Broadcasting*, which described plans for the organizing convention. Similar language was adopted as part of the group's founding constitution, adopted in April, 1951.

could be overcome, to some degree, by diligence, luck, good timing and persistence, even though it ended on an unhappy note. This dissertation evaluates her success at crafting an image that rejected a feminist label, but ultimately embraced the values of feminism. Studying Edythe Meserand's career enhances our understanding of the gender complexities that surrounded women in early broadcasting. Chapter eight concludes with suggested opportunities for future research.

## Chapter 2: Literature Review and Theoretical Perspective

Edythe Meserand's papers, housed in the Library of American Broadcasting at the University of Maryland, are the centerpiece of this research.<sup>7</sup> The materials cover the period from 1926 until the time of her death in 1997. Most of the materials focus on her career at WOR Radio, beginning in 1937, and her role as a founder and the first president of American Women in Radio and Television in the early 1950's.

The framework and historical context for this study were gleaned from a large and wide-ranging body of writing, which included work on the history of radio, journalism history, women in journalism, and women's journalism organizations. These secondary source materials helped inform my study, and guided my thinking throughout this research. Many of them figure prominently in the narratives of Meserand's professional life in Chapters four and five, and of her work with the American Women in Radio and Television in Chapters six and seven.

In this chapter, I will provide an overview of secondary source literature, including the few scholarly works that mention Edythe Meserand. This will be followed by a discussion of the theoretical and historical perspectives employed. Finally, a more detailed description of the primary archival source material will be provided.

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<sup>7</sup> Meserand's papers, comprising fourteen boxes, five scrapbooks and numerous tape recorded interviews and speeches are housed in the Library of American Broadcasting, part of the special collections division at Hornbake Library on the campus of the University of Maryland in College Park. Throughout this document, they will be referred to as "Edythe Meserand Papers."

### Edythe Meserand in the Literature

Meserand's career in radio, which began in 1926, was conducted almost entirely out of the spotlight. It is, therefore, no surprise that she is not among the handful of women "notables" who appear in the major literature on the history of women in radio. To the limited extent she is referenced, it is generally as a founder and the first president of the American Women in Radio and Television. Her earlier work in both network and local radio and television is mentioned, but not in depth.

*Invisible Stars*, Donna Halper's social history of women in broadcasting, describes Meserand as a "woman pioneer in the 1930's," although, as has been noted, Meserand had had no particular career aspirations and no knowledge of the radio industry when she began work at the newly formed NBC Radio Network in 1926. She quickly demonstrated a willingness to work hard and a desire to move up, however, and Halper traces Meserand's progress from an entry-level secretary to press liaison and network publicist. She was, according to Halper, among the women climbing the ladder "into more important and responsible jobs," but whose stories were seldom told because the work these women were doing was not regarded as "especially noteworthy."<sup>8</sup> Through her research, Halper resurrects the careers of many of these "invisible" women. Edythe Meserand is one of seventeen women briefly profiled in an appendix to the book; she is one of only five whose broadcasting careers included work in news.<sup>9</sup>

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<sup>8</sup> Halper, 59-65.

<sup>9</sup> *Ibid.*, 261-265. The other women associated with news-related work included Kathryn Cravens, Nancy Dickerson, Pauline Frederick and Dorothy Fuldheim.

Meserand is among a group of twenty-two women mentioned in Catherine Heinz' 1978 article on "Women Radio Pioneers," in the *Journal of Popular Culture*. Those included were among radio's earliest initiates and their positions reflected the breadth of opportunity that existed for a relatively brief time in radio's early decades.<sup>10</sup> Heinz tracks the entry points for these women, and continues with a brief look at how they ultimately fared in their broadcasting careers. Meserand is among those cited whose career paths extended over several decades. Her's included a brief on-air stint as a "Musical Clock Girl," her work in news and public affairs at WOR Radio and TV, and her stewardship of the American Women in Radio and Television organization.<sup>11</sup>

Her association with AWRT is, in fact, the most common reference point in the literature that mentions Meserand's professional career. Her role as one of the founders and the first president of the group appears, albeit briefly, in a handful of texts focusing on women in broadcasting. She is mentioned in two chapters of Elizabeth Burt's edited collection *Women's Press Organization, 1881-1999*. In the first reference, Meserand offers her explanation of why the male-dominated National Association of Broadcasters grew uncomfortable with the NAB's internal women's "auxiliary" group, the Association of Women Broadcasters. She suggested there was concern the personalities and politics of the women's group might veer "out of control."<sup>12</sup> Meserand is featured more prominently in the chapter on formation of

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<sup>10</sup> The women included were secretaries and receptionists, singers and actresses. Many hosted women's and children's programs, some were writers and announcers; a very few were radio executives.

<sup>11</sup> Catherine Heinz, "Women Radio Pioneers," *Journal of Popular Culture*, Vol. 12, Issue 2 (Fall 1978), 305-314.

<sup>12</sup> Michael P. McCauley, "Association of Women Broadcasters, 1942-1950," in *Women's Press Organizations, 1881-1999*, ed. Elizabeth Burt (Westport, CT: Greenwood Press, 2000) 27-38.

American Women in Radio and Television, the independent organization which grew out of the NAB-sponsored group after it had fallen out of favor with key members of the NAB leadership.<sup>13</sup> It points out Meserand was named to a steering committee charged with devising a plan for the new group and served as the chair for the organizing convention, held in New York City in April, 1951. On the convention's final day, she was elected the group's first president.

Meserand also appears in Halper's book in a short section on the founding of the American Women in Radio and Television. Meserand's role in the group's formation is detailed, and Halper cites Meserand's "long" and "impressive" career during which she received "numerous" awards.<sup>14</sup> In her brief discussion of the group, Halper highlights an issue which had challenged women in broadcasting from its earliest days: They felt marginalized and under-appreciated. The women wanted "their industry to take what they did seriously," Halper wrote.<sup>15</sup> AWRT was seen as providing a path to recognition.

Additional insight into the founding of AWRT, and a more revealing treatment of Edythe Meserand's role in the group's early development may be found in a paper that was presented at the 2002 conference of the Association for Education in Journalism and Mass Communication and later published in *Media Report to Women*.<sup>16</sup> Stacy Spaulding examined the motivation of the founders to form an independent women's organization. She described a strong desire to help women

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<sup>13</sup> Sonya Forte Duhe, "American Women in Radio and Television, 1951-Present," in Burt, 1-10.

<sup>14</sup> Halper, 161-162, 264.

<sup>15</sup> Ibid., 161.

<sup>16</sup> Stacy Spaulding, "The Formation of AWRT: A Case Study in Women's Professionalization," *Media Report to Women* 3 (Winter 2003): 15-18.

succeed, and to advance in a profession in which their interests were not being adequately addressed. Spaulding found Meserand's involvement of particular interest since she was, by her own description, no fan of women's organizations. Ultimately, Meserand embraced the opportunity to lead a group which was devoted to advancing and acknowledging women's work.

### Women in Radio in the Literature

In contrast to the limited attention in the literature to Edythe Meserand's work in broadcasting, there is a growing body of material that provides evidence of the range of roles women played in radio's development. It is a story told in distinctively different parts. Historians contend that in its earliest years, when radio stations were crude facilities, operating at the margins of business, the doors were opened broadly to all comers. Media historian Michelle Hilmes discovered the lack of prestige and the loosely structured nature of early radio operations meant women faced less resistance than in "the more conservative, established professions," so under these conditions, Hilmes maintained, "...it was a natural place for women."<sup>17</sup> Halper found little evidence of "traditional gender roles" and considerable evidence of "experimentation."<sup>18</sup> She detailed a favorable job climate for women in early radio

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<sup>17</sup> Hilmes, *Radio Voices*. 137-138.

<sup>18</sup> Halper, 12. Hilmes also refers to "flexible" gender roles and the "experimental" nature of early radio in three of her works: "Desired and Feared: Women's Voices in Radio History," in *Television History and American Culture: Feminist Critical Essays*, ed. Mary Beth Haralovich and Lauren Rabinovitz, (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 1999), 17-35; *Only Connect: A Cultural History of Broadcasting in the United States* (Belmont, CA: Wadsworth, 2001), 46; *Radio Voices*, 138.



which, she said “provided an immediate opportunity for anyone ... who had a good idea for something to put on the air.”<sup>19</sup>

In her 1977 history of women in journalism, Marian Marzolf devoted a chapter to women working in radio, describing it as an “excellent” field for women. Marzolf claimed women working in radio faced “less discrimination because of sex” than in most other types of work.<sup>20</sup> She identified a handful of women who found success in early radio, including Bertha Brainard, Judith Waller and Margaret Cuthbert. Meserand is never mentioned.<sup>21</sup> Marzolf’s optimistic assessment may have been drawn from a lengthy collection of essays which provided a broad overview of workplace options for women in the early 1930’s. Six women working in radio contributed essays describing a wide range of opportunities in what was still a relatively young industry. In one, Cuthbert, who was then director of the speaker’s bureau at NBC, wrote “radio, perhaps more than other new industries, has opened up new and fertile fields for women.”<sup>22</sup> Waller, who is consistently remembered as an early radio pioneer, described the evolution in radio programming as a process in which men clearly needed women’s help: “Analysis and anticipation of feminine listening requirements have often been regarded as more than slightly mysterious. The elusive “women’s angle’ ... has frequently been sought by *the employment of one woman* for that specific purpose ... .”<sup>23</sup>

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<sup>19</sup> Halper, 16-17.

<sup>20</sup> Marion Marzolf, *Up From the Footnote* (New York: Hastings House Press, 1977), 123.

<sup>21</sup> The three women cited by Marzolf are routinely included on lists of “notables” appearing in the literature on early radio. Brainard and Cuthbert also figured prominently in Edythe Meserand’s career.

<sup>22</sup> Margaret Cuthbert in *New Ideas, New Methods, New Opportunities to fit a New World*, ed. Catherine Filene (Houston: Houghton Mifflin, 1934), 489-507.

<sup>23</sup> Judith Waller, *Radio: The Fifth Estate* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1946), 131.

NOTE: italics are mine

In an earlier work, Genevieve Jackson Boughner took a sweeping look at workplace opportunities in *Women in Journalism*, which she described as a practical guide to the opportunities, techniques and training ‘for which the woman writer is best qualified.’<sup>24</sup> Boughner, who taught journalism at the University of Wisconsin and later at the University of Minnesota, celebrated the “triumph” of women “invading and making good in practically all fields of journalism.” At the same time, in what may have been a harbinger of the next phase in radio opportunities for women, she claimed that most (women) will succeed more quickly by making “a distinctly feminine contribution.”<sup>25</sup> The commercial radio industry was less than a decade old when Boughner wrote this book in 1926, but there were a handful of specific radio references explaining opportunities for women in the new medium. What was clear even then, however, was that the same gender divide which was commonplace in newspaper city rooms across the country was beginning to take hold in radio. In general, it was men who were running the show, managing the enterprise and handling announcing chores. Women were finding opportunities, but most of them were in programming aimed at the female audience.

One of the most persistent issues in any discussion of women’s opportunities in radio was the long-simmering debate over the quality of women’s voices, first raised in the publication *Radio Broadcast* in 1924. Jennie Irene Mix, whose column in the monthly publication offered reviews and critiques of radio programs, reported on a letter sent to the magazine from a reader who happened to be a phonograph

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<sup>24</sup> Genevieve Jackson Boughner, *Women in Journalism* (New York: D. Appleton and Company, 1926), vii.

<sup>25</sup> Boughner, viii.

record dealer.<sup>26</sup> In the letter, he explained that poor sales of recordings featuring women speakers led him to believe that the radio listening public would not accept women announcers. “The voice of a woman, when she cannot be seen,” he suggested, “is very undesirable, and to many, both men and women, displeasing.”<sup>27</sup> Mix took the issue to a group of radio station managers and summarized their response in her column. While some cited examples of successful women announcers, a few agreed with the writer, saying women’s voices “lacked a distinct personality,” were “affected ... and stiff,” and “tend to be monotonous.”<sup>28</sup> Mix observed that some women and, she argued, some men were unpleasant to listen to, but she concluded “if a woman knows her business when she speaks before the microphone, she can create a most favorable impression.”<sup>29</sup>

This was hardly the end of the debate. Two years later, the same magazine published the results of an unscientific listener poll which found the preference for male announcers to be “overwhelming.”<sup>30</sup> Charles Popenoe, the manager of the station conducting the poll suggested there might be a technical explanation. “Most (radio) receiving sets do not reproduce perfectly the higher notes. A man’s voice ‘takes’ better. It has more volume.”<sup>31</sup> This technical explanation for bias against women announcers was not uncommon in the literature of early radio. But it was only one of the enduring arguments used to justify prejudice against women. Women

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<sup>26</sup> Jennie Irene Mix, “Are Women Undesirable – Over the Radio?” *Radio Broadcast*, August, 1924, 333-338.

<sup>27</sup> *Ibid.* 333.

<sup>28</sup> Mix, “For and Against the Woman Radio Speaker,” *Radio Broadcast*, September, 1924, 391-393.

<sup>29</sup> *Ibid.* 395.

<sup>30</sup> John Wallace, “The Listener’s Point of View,” *Radio Broadcast*, November, 1926, 44-45.

<sup>31</sup> *Ibid.*

who wanted to broadcast were told their voices were “not authoritative enough,”<sup>32</sup> and were “without lure.”<sup>33</sup> Historian George Douglas called the claimed “sonic superiority” of the male voice debatable; he offered another explanation: “It seems more likely that the disappearance of women from key announcing duties during the thirties was due to the fact that males simply muscled in on what had become a very lucrative profession and taken all the spoils for themselves.”<sup>34</sup>

By the end of radio’s first decade, much of the latitude women had enjoyed in radio’s early days was gone. Commercial possibilities for the still young medium were increasingly apparent; the influence of radio advertisers in program decision-making was growing, and the early flexibility in gender roles was being replaced by a much more rigid structure in the workplace. The link between these developments was no coincidence as radio evolved further into a highly gendered social and industrial system.

Hilmes, who has written extensively on the subject, traces the “gradual exclusion of women from non-feminine-designated areas of production and industry management... .”<sup>35</sup> She identifies the shifting environment as one in which women were increasingly “confined to public service, educational, and children’s concerns, and the culturally disparaged forms of daytime ‘women’s genres.”<sup>36</sup> Judith Cramer points out that many of the opportunities for women were a “logical extension of their

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<sup>32</sup> Carolyn Kitch, “Women in Journalism,” in *American Journalism: History, Principles, Practices*, ed. William David Sloan and Lisa Mullikin Parcell (Jefferson, NC: McFarland and Company, 2002), 92.

<sup>33</sup> “Women Fall Down on the Air,” *Variety*, March 11, 1931, 67.

<sup>34</sup> George H. Douglas. *The Early Days of Radio Broadcasting* (Jefferson, NC: McFarland and Company, 1987). 65.

<sup>35</sup> Hilmes, *Radio Voices*, 165.

<sup>36</sup> *Ibid.* 140.

roles within the home.”<sup>37</sup> The rise of gendered distinctions in radio programming and the influence this had in defining both opportunities and limitations for women will be discussed further in Chapter six.

Clearly, radio’s open door for women, had narrowed. They were no longer considered viable contributors in many aspects of radio programming and production. Announcing was no longer an option, unless they hosted “women’s” programs or read stories for children. Another area that was almost entirely off-limits to women was in news which was just beginning to emerge as a programming form.

### *The Emergence of News on Radio*

News and information had a place on radio from the earliest days, typically in the form of special event broadcasts aimed at a specific audience or short readings from newspaper headlines. As early as 1922, less than a year after the first regular commercial broadcast, nearly seventy radio stations were actually owned by newspapers.<sup>38</sup> But as chronicled by Mitchell Charnley, Robert J. Brown, and J. Fred McDonald among others, it took years for radio news to develop.<sup>39</sup> As a distinct program element, radio news did not appear regularly until the 1930s.

The focus for most scholars who have examined the development of news on radio has been on the programming of radio networks. This is not surprising given

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<sup>37</sup> Judith A. Cramer “A Woman’s Place is On the Air,” in *Women in Mass Communication, Second Edition*, ed. Pamela J. Creedon (Newbury Park: Sage Publications, 1993), 154.

<sup>38</sup> McDonald, 282.

<sup>39</sup> See especially Mitchell Charnley, *News By Radio*, (New York: The Macmillan Company, 1949), 1-5; McDonald, 286-87; Christopher H. Sterling and John M. Kittross, *Stay Tuned: A Concise History of American Broadcasting* (Belmont, CA: Wadsworth Publishing, 1990), 122-124; Robert J. Brown, *Manipulating the Ether: The Power of Broadcast Radio in Thirties America* (Jefferson, N.C.: McFarland & Company, 1998), 131-136.

the nationwide reach and influence of the powerful network operations, and the limited but significant trail of archival evidence of their early program efforts. This is, however, only a portion of the story. Historian Susan Douglas has pointed out that in the late 1930s and early 1940s there were four times as many locally originated news programs as national ones.<sup>40</sup> Douglas cites earlier research conducted by Paul Lazarsfeld and Frank Stanton which found that eighty per cent of the news reports from this period originated at local stations and featured local commentators.<sup>41</sup> It is in this significant, but largely unstudied, arena that Edythe Meserand practiced her craft.

The timing of her professional path, as it developed over the period leading up to and during World War II, is key in any evaluation of Meserand's career. The growing presence of news on radio, and its emergence as an information medium of choice during this period have been described by Eric Barnouw, Lichty and Topping, Sterling and Kitross, and Edward J. Bliss. Their work provided important context and background for this research.<sup>42</sup> This will be discussed further in Chapter 3.

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<sup>40</sup> Susan Douglas, *Listening In: Radio and the American Imagination*, (New York: Times Books, 1999), 174-175.

<sup>41</sup> Paul F. Lazarsfeld and Frank N. Stanton, *Radio Research 1942-43* (New York: Essential Books, 1944), 119.

<sup>42</sup> See Eric Barnouw, *The Golden Web: A History of Broadcasting in the United States, Vol. 2* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1968), Lawrence W. Lichty and Malachi C. Topping, eds. *American Broadcasting: A Source Book on the History of Radio and Television* (New York: Hastings House Publishers, 1975), 338-344; Sterling & Kitross, especially 180-196; Edward J. Bliss, *Now the News: The Story of Broadcast Journalism* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1991).

### Methods Employed and Theoretical Approach

This research has been guided broadly by the methods described first by Startt and Sloan, and in an updated volume by Sloan and Stamm. These methods emphasize the collection of evidence, the interpretation of that evidence, and the production of a narrative which tells a story about the research subject.<sup>43</sup> The nature of historical media study raises particular challenges in its reliance on the collection and analysis of data that may be incomplete. Media historian Michelle Hilmes has identified the difficulty when examining radio's early years: "Much of what was actually broadcast – the sounds and stories actually experienced by listeners – went out live, unrecorded, and with little record keeping. Many – the vast majority – of broadcast hours are lost forever."<sup>44</sup> Therefore, those engaged in this area of historical study recognize the limits of their limitations of the discipline.

"It would be unrealistic for any audience to expect the full truth about a segment of the past from historians and arrogant of historians to claim they had discovered it. What can be expected is that they be truthful to the greatest extent possible, that they work to understand the past on its own terms, and that they demonstrate judgment that is honest, perceptive, and balanced."<sup>45</sup>

This study's focus on a career and an industry transformed by the dramatic cultural shifts as a world went to war places this research within what Startt, Sloan and Stamm have identified as the Cultural School of media history. In this

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<sup>43</sup> James D. Startt and William David Sloan, *Historical Methods in Mass Communication* (Hillsdale, NJ: Lawrence Erlbaum Associates, 1989), 2-20; William David Sloan and Michael Stamm, *Historical Methods in Communication*, 3<sup>rd</sup> Edition (Northport, Alabama: Vision Press, 2010), 1-22 .

<sup>44</sup> Hilmes, *Radio Voices*, xvi.

<sup>45</sup> Startt & Sloan, 47, Sloan & Stamm, 55.

interpretation, the investigation focuses on society's effects on the media, rather than media's effects on the society.<sup>46</sup>

The work of historian Maurine Beasley has contributed to the framework for this research. She has observed that biographical studies of women journalists have frequently evaluated their achievements based on an ability to succeed in a man's world. In large measure, this research follows that path, since Meserand had no professional model against which she could judge her work in news, other than that of the men with whom she worked. Beasley has advocated research that expands the frame of reference to include the breadth of women's experience through biography, oral history and women's networking and organizations. This, Beasley asserts, will lead to a wider perspective that incorporates the study of women "on their own terms."<sup>47</sup> Examination of Meserand's role in AWRT, from its founding and throughout the last portion of her career, is intended to provide that wider perspective.

Susan Henry has also advocated a more expansive approach to the study of women journalists that moves beyond a largely descriptive approach that has examined women's roles and contributions within the "traditional, male-defined standards of journalism history."<sup>48</sup> More relevant to this research, Henry has discussed the importance of including the unrecognized contributions of women in any examination of media history.

"Uncovering women's contributions that have been hidden behind male accomplishments does more than add another dimension to our knowledge

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<sup>46</sup> Startt & Sloan, 35-38; Sloan and Stamm, 40-48.

<sup>47</sup> Maurine H. Beasley, "Recent Directions for the Study of Women's History in American Journalism," *Journalism Studies* 2, no. 2 (2001): 207-220.

<sup>48</sup> Susan Henry, "Changing Media History Through Women's History," in Creedon, 349.



of the work done by women in journalism. It also calls into question the tendency of journalism historians to pay little attention to journalists who worked behind the scenes or lacked official titles. Equally important, it illustrates the importance of better recognizing the collaborative effort ... that may well have been behind a substantial amount of our journalism.”<sup>49</sup>

Issues of gender did not figure prominently in Edythe Meserand’s thinking. Her professional life took place between feminism’s first two waves and the approach she took to her work seemed to reflect a matter-of-fact nonchalance about the challenges she faced. She was, nevertheless, striving to succeed in a field where the established model was masculine. Whether as a news writer, program producer or as a radio executive, her contributions were measured against a male standard by her employers. Feminist approaches are, therefore, appropriate for this research because they offer a lens to see to what degree Meserand was limited by the fact of her gender.

Liesbet van Zoonen has written that feminist theory is not a “homogeneous field,” but she identifies common concepts that distinguish it, such as “its unconditional focus on analyzing gender as a mechanism that structures material and symbolic worlds and our experiences of them.”<sup>50</sup> The story of Edythe Meserand’s professional life cannot be told without an understanding of the gendered environments in which she worked. Feminist theory informs this study by providing a viewpoint for the examination of her career, including the relationships of power in her workplace.

If, when exploring the role gender plays in a career, one assumes the workplace to be male-dominated, which this research does, the conversation must

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<sup>49</sup> Ibid. 355.

<sup>50</sup> Liesbet van Zoonen, *Feminist Media Studies* (London: Sage Publications, 1994), 3.

include discussion of the tactics and coping mechanisms that women developed to allow them to navigate the newsroom/workplace waters. One strategy may best be described as incorporation: accept the (male-dominated) culture, embrace male values, and adopt characteristics of male thinking.<sup>51</sup> This normalizing process presumes that women choose to submerge or even deny their personal gender identity, which Linda Steiner has found can create “deep conflicts” for women as they balance their professional identities with their sensibilities as women.<sup>52</sup> Nevertheless, adoption of this approach can serve a number of purposes: it may be a strategy to avoid dealing with male colleagues in sexual terms<sup>53</sup> but more frequently, it may be seen as a way to secure status as a news professional.<sup>54</sup>

Deeply embedded in the newsroom culture are the journalistic norms and principles that are the underpinnings of the profession. These transcend individuals and organizations, and are generally construed to be the guidelines for “doing” journalism. Karen Ross finds these “professional knowledge systems” to be a powerful influence in building a shared culture.<sup>55</sup> Beasley places the argument into gender context: “Women, who are socialized differently than men, may not report exactly the same way as men. Yet professional values, to which individuals of both

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<sup>51</sup> See Karen Ross, “Women at Work: Journalism as En-gendered Practice.” *Journalism Studies* 2 (2001): 531-544; Patricia Bradley, *Women and the Press: The Struggle for Equality* (Evanston, IL, Northwestern University Press, 2005); Linda Steiner, “Critiquing Journalism: Feminist Perspectives Relevant to Contemporary Challenges,” in *Women, Men and News: Divided and Disconnected in the News Media Landscape*, ed. Paula Poindexter, Sharon Meraz & Amy Schmitz Weiss (New York: Routledge, 2008), 280-87; Marjan DeBruin & Karen Ross, eds., *Gender and Newsroom Cultures: Identities at Work* (Cresskill, NJ: Hampton Press, 2004).

<sup>52</sup> Linda Steiner. “Gender at Work: Early Accounts by Women Journalists.” *Journalism History* 23, no. 1 (Spring, 1997): 2-12.

<sup>53</sup> DeBruin & Ross, 11.

<sup>54</sup> Deborah Chambers, Linda Steiner & Carole Fleming, *Women and Journalism* (London: Routledge, 2004); David Weaver, “Women as Journalists” in *Women, Media and Politics*, ed. Pippa Norris (New York: Oxford University Press, 1997), 21-40; DeBruin & Ross, 2004.

<sup>55</sup> Ross, 2001, 540.

genders must subscribe if they are to be hired and move ahead...serve to reduce, if not eliminate the differences.”<sup>56</sup> This research represents an effort to examine Meserand’s career in this context, and to evaluate her contributions as a notable figure who operated in an unusual setting for a woman at the time.

### Primary Source Material

Archival materials held in the Library of American Broadcasting at the University of Maryland were the primary sources used in this study. The Edythe Meserand Papers, comprising 13 boxes, include radio and television scripts, professional and personal correspondence, office memos, and news clippings. The collection also features transcripts and recordings of speeches and interviews, photographs, certificates and several large scrapbooks marking special events commemorating Meserand’s career. A few tape recordings are also included in the collection; most are from speeches, but one is a lengthy oral history interview which was conducted in 1977 for the Broadcast Pioneers. All of the materials are available to the public, and are indexed in a finding aid.<sup>57</sup>

Another useful collection which is also housed at the Library of American Broadcasting is the American Women in Radio and Television (AWRT) Archive. These papers were important as a supplement to materials from the Meserand collection when examining her AWRT work. They also provided helpful information

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<sup>56</sup> Beasley. *Taking Their Place: A Documentary History of Women and Journalism* (State College, PA: Strata Publishing, 2003), 212.

<sup>57</sup> The finding aid is available online:

<http://digital.lib.umd.edu/archivesum/actions.DisplayEADDoc.do?source=MdU.ead.lab.0010.xml&style=ead>

on AWB, the Association of Women Broadcasters, which was the predecessor group to AWRT. The AWRT Oral History Archive was especially helpful in gaining a retrospective view of the organization and its predecessor group, the Association of Women Broadcasters (AWB). Many of the interviews were conducted with women who played active roles in both organizations.

This research benefited from the oral history holdings at Columbia University, and recordings from the WOR collection at the Library of Congress. In 1984, the station donated thousands of hours of its programming, along with a paper archive documenting WOR's long and diverse broadcasting history. Much of the recorded material is now available through the Library of Congress Recorded Sound Reference Center. The supporting printed materials, comprising four hundred fifty drawers of memos, manuscripts, and station memorabilia have not yet been processed and were not available for this study.

Although this work emerged largely from archival research, several interviews with friends, professional acquaintances and family members were conducted. Meserand's great niece, Ellen Huber Fields was generous in her recollections, and contributed much to fill in the personal side of a woman who spoke only occasionally of her private and family life. Mary Anne Krupsak recalled working with Meserand during four political campaigns, beginning in the 1960s, when Krupsak was running for statewide office in New York. Tracy Egan, who was a recipient of the Edythe Meserand Distinguished Broadcaster Award in 1995, recalled Meserand as a mentor and career guide; Fred LeBrun was a professional colleague who became a friend and regular visitor to Meserand's farm. Karen Hazzard, Lynda Marino and Lorraine

Whiting all met Meserand later in life, mostly as a result of their work together on historic preservation in the rural upstate New York area where Meserand moved after she left New York City. The conversations were conducted by telephone over a two-year period, from February 2012 to March 2014. All of these interviews were helpful in piecing together a profile of Meserand after she left daily broadcasting. However, for the same reason, their contribution to the picture of Meserand's earlier professional life was limited.

Finally, it is important to note the inevitable limitations on research conducted when the principal sources are archival records and, in particular, personal papers. By their very nature, collections such as Meserand's present a special challenge. The researcher cannot know the extent of materials that were not included, or the degree to which the documents present were selected to reveal or minimize some aspects of the subject's life. In this study, every effort has been made to account for these limitations by locating supporting documentation from other available sources. An unanticipated product of this research was the conclusion that Edythe Meserand used her marketing skills on her own behalf in crafting a public image that she wanted to preserve.

## Chapter 3: History and Context

When Edythe Meserand began working in 1926 at the newly formed NBC Radio Network, there were fourteen stations on the air, for at least a portion of the day, in the New York metropolitan market. At this early stage in the medium's development, radio programming was a hodge-podge and included offerings ranging from daily devotions to exercise programs, from sports to interviews and occasional "talks" by experts and people prominent in the news.<sup>58</sup> Only three stations had identifiable news "periods." Weather and "market" reports were much more prominently featured. Unquestionably, however, the mainstay of the schedule was music and entertainment, ranging from full orchestra performances and piano recitals to dramatic presentations, solo singers, operas and dance music shows. The performers were the stars of 1926 radio, in New York and elsewhere, and a teenaged Edythe Meserand found herself in the middle of the excitement.<sup>59</sup> Her first job at NBC as a low-level assistant in the press department quickly grew into a position as press liaison. It was her responsibility to handle requests for interviews and photo shoots from the growing numbers of newspaper reporters who were assigned to cover the popular radio stars. Decades later, Meserand described the opportunity to work

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<sup>58</sup> On October 1, 1926, a talk by Eleanor Roosevelt was listed among the days "outstanding events" in the New York Times radio schedule.

<sup>59</sup> A summary of the NBC schedule for 1927 shows that nearly 80 percent of the programming provided by the network could be categorized as music. Data gathered by Lichty & Topping and cited in Sterling & Kitross, 844.

and “hobnob” with the artists and celebrities of that period as the “most fantastic job in the world.”<sup>60</sup>

Meserand’s entry into the labor market came at an auspicious time. The 1920s was a seminal decade in the American landscape, featuring cultural and social disruptions, and technological growth. A century of struggle for women ended in August 1920 when the nineteenth Amendment to the Constitution was passed, giving women the right to vote. Just over two months later, on November 2, 1920, more than 8 million women across the United States voted in elections for the first time. On that election night, Pittsburgh radio station KDKA transmitted the returns of the presidential race. Many historians call this the birth date for radio, although some broadcasting scholars, including Douglas Gomery, have challenged this enduring assumption.<sup>61</sup> In any case, it seems reasonable to identify 1920 as an important year for broadcasting and for women. And as increasing numbers of women were entering the workforce, it was also the year the U.S. Department of Labor established its Women’s Bureau, with a mandate “to safeguard the interests of working women; to advocate for their equality and economic security ... and to promote quality work environments.”<sup>62</sup> Arguably, radio was emerging at a time of great social and cultural change.

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<sup>60</sup> Interview with Edythe Meserand by Fern Ingersol, Women in Journalism oral history project of the Washington Press Club Foundation, 31 August, 1990, 6, in the Library of American Broadcasting, University of Maryland and other repositories.

<sup>61</sup> Gomery identifies July 2, 1921 as the “Big Bang” day for radio broadcasting. In contrast to the few hundred who were able to listen to the 1920 election results, the boxing match between Jack Dempsey and George Carpentier, broadcast on July 2, 1921, reached hundreds of thousands of radio listeners. See Douglas Gomery, *The History of Broadcasting* (Malden, MA: Blackwell Publishing, 2008), 1-37.

<sup>62</sup> Mission Statement, U.S. Department of Labor Women’s Bureau, June, 1920.  
[http://www.dol.gov/wb/info\\_about\\_wb/mission.htm](http://www.dol.gov/wb/info_about_wb/mission.htm) (accessed 12/27/13)

The phenomenal growth of radio broadcasting in its first decade is easily quantifiable: on January 1, 1922, there were approximately 30 radio stations on the air in the United States. Ten years later, at the beginning of 1932, the number had jumped to more than 600.<sup>63</sup> Sixty thousand American homes had a radio set in 1922; by New Year's Day, 1932, that number had soared to 18,450,000.<sup>64</sup>

### Early Radio and Women's Place

This dramatic growth in radio broadcasting provided new employment opportunities for both men and women, particularly from the early to mid-1920s, when there was no obvious sexual division of labor. In this period of experimentation and expansion, women performed in a wide range of positions, as entertainers and talent scouts, as writers, announcers and program directors, even as station managers. Women in radio broadcasting "sized up the field as an excellent one for them...the opportunity to move into creative and responsible positions was good."<sup>65</sup> The experience of Bertha Brainard provides an early and powerful example. In 1922, she parlayed her role as a theater critic into a job hosting "Broadcasting Broadway" on WJZ Radio, where she offered theater reviews and "talks" with Broadway stars. Brainard found little resistance from the men with whom she worked. "The vast majority ... think nothing of the fact that I am a woman," she claimed.<sup>66</sup> She also believed a woman could "fill practically any position (in radio),

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<sup>63</sup> Statistics derived from various sources, including the Department of Commerce, the Federal Communications Commission, the Federal Radio Commission, cited in Sterling & Kitross, 826-7.

<sup>64</sup> Statistics from the National Association of Broadcasters, cited in Sterling & Kitross, 862.

<sup>65</sup> Marzolf, 123.

<sup>66</sup> Halper, 40. Halper cites a December 18, 1927 *Boston Globe* article "Sex No Longer a Factor in Business." Sec. 2, p. 7.



providing she is willing to concentrate her energies upon it and do the job exactly as a man would.”<sup>67</sup> Brainard would go on to become one of the first women executives for a radio network. As Program Director for NBC, she was an early mentor and role-model for Edythe Meserand.

A sampling of press attention to Brainard’s prominence highlighted her ability, determination, and judgment. She was called “the first great woman executive”<sup>68</sup> who possessed the ability to “think quickly and calmly under the fire of modern business.”<sup>69</sup> Also included in most of these glowing accounts of her administrative and programming savvy, however, are the sorts of physical depictions unlikely to appear in any profile of a male executive. Brainard was described as “a beautiful, red-headed woman at a daintily decorated desk,”<sup>70</sup> and “a typical modern woman – feminine and efficient.”<sup>71</sup> The same *New York Times* article from early 1939 which called her the “foremost woman in her field,” went on to mention her red hair, petite figure and smart clothes.<sup>72</sup>

Brainard’s is an exceptional case. Her story is recounted regularly in histories of early radio, and her well-publicized success extended well beyond those early experimental years when the doors of opportunity were open for women. As the industry developed, a more traditional view of gender roles took hold. Michele Hilmes says this “institutional rigidity” reflected a growing and maturing medium, but she also says it does not tell the full story. Hilmes argues much of the “received”

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<sup>67</sup> Ibid.

<sup>68</sup> “The Nine Greatest Women in Radio,” *Radio Stars*, December, 1934, 97.

<sup>69</sup> “We Pay Our Respects,” *Broadcasting*, September 1, 1934, 45.

<sup>70</sup> “What is Women’s Place in Broadcasting?” *Radio News*, November, 1927, 477.

<sup>71</sup> *Radio Stars*, December, 1934, 97.

<sup>72</sup> Kathleen McLaughlin, “Woman Builds High Place in Organizing Air Programs,” *New York Times*, January 22, 1939, 42.

history of discrimination against women in radio overlooks their considerable contributions. She calls this the gender blind spot:

“Traditional studies of broadcasting ... deal with a world in which women, as individuals and as a group, barely seem to exist and in which it is only the discourses and actions of men that have relevance. ... Women, in fact, invented and sustained some of broadcasting’s most central innovations and served in key decision-making roles, and furthermore participated in the development of entire genres that spoke to them ... about the interests and concerns of women’s lives.”<sup>73</sup>

#### *The 1930s – A Maturing Medium and a Developing Career*

In the early 1930s, Edythe Meserand found ways to work creatively within the gender restrictions taking hold in the broadcasting workplace. After being fired from NBC in 1931, she went to work for WGBS, at a time when radio was emerging as an increasingly potent economic force, and one in which women were recognized as a prime audience. New program and advertising opportunities, and along with them new revenue streams, were obvious. Women’s programs of all sorts appeared on the air, and by the end of the decade, most local radio stations and radio networks had established women’s departments.<sup>74</sup> A review of mid-1930s radio schedules supports this view, showing programs focused on homemaking, cooking, child-rearing and beauty, with titles ranging from “Decorating Talk,” “Today’s Children,”

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<sup>73</sup> Hilmes, *Radio Voices*, 131-32.

<sup>74</sup> Marzolf, 125.

“Mrs. Page’s Home Economics,” and “Modern Woman” to “Farm and Home Hour,” “Home Sweet Home,” and “How to be Charming.”<sup>75</sup>

In 1931, the year Meserand joined WGBS there were sixteen stations in the New York market, offering a growing variety of programming during an expanded broadcast day. Musical performances of all sorts still dominated the airwaves, but by now, movie and book reviews were an occasional feature, and more specialized “talks” had been added to program schedules on topics as diverse as gardening and preventative dentistry. News, as a program element, was still barely a factor. Fewer than ten distinct news “periods” appear on the radio program listing for Dec. 30, 1931.<sup>76</sup> But by this time, information and news were beginning to appear on the air in less obvious forms, and Edythe Meserand had a role to play in this development, as the host of a program called the “Musical Clock.” This early morning wake-up program was primarily a music show, but inbetween selections, Meserand, one of the first of the Musical Clock “girls,” provided the time, temperature, traffic and brief news updates. She did not seek the on-air broadcasting role, but did the work because it was the job she was hired to do. Her focus, however, was on her other job as the assistant program director. For Meserand, this opened the door to radio program development. Years later, she described this period as the real starting point in her broadcasting career.

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<sup>75</sup> Program listing sources included Sterling & Kitross, 181, Cramer in Creedon, 154, *The New York Times*, 16 January, 1935, 15, 3 June, 1935, 20, 5 August, 1935, 29.

<sup>76</sup> *New York Times*, December 30, 1931, 26, accessed through ProQuest Historical Newspapers via the University of Maryland Library research portal on January 2, 2014.  
<http://search.proquest.com/hnpnewyorktimesindex/docview/99099847/142B94A3DF16822B881/1?accountid=14696>

The growth in programming targeting women which took place during this period produced a complicated mix of results. It was, on the one hand, an implied recognition of the growing numbers and power of the female audience. New programming forms also meant new opportunities for women working in radio. At the same time, however, the same sort of gender separation evident in most workplaces was now taking hold in radio, in the form of a stereotypical sexual division of labor, and broadcast schedules which were divided into segments featuring distinctly gendered program forms. Despite research which showed women made up a small majority of the night-time audience, the prime evening hours were generally viewed as more prestigious, “high” culture, of educational value, and “male.” Programs presumed to be of interest to women were relegated to the “separate, restricted...” daytime “ghetto,”<sup>77</sup> hours when women comprised more than two-thirds of the radio audience.<sup>78</sup>

Michelle Hilmes has described this period as evidence of the tension resulting from radio’s conflicting missions of public service and private profit. On the one hand, the industry needed to convince federal regulators of its public service commitment to cultural and educational programming, at the same time acknowledging its commercial imperatives and thus, a willingness to exploit an “economic base that clearly rested on the female purchaser... .”<sup>79</sup>

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<sup>77</sup> Hilmes, “Desired and Feared: Women’s Voices in Radio History.” 17-18.

<sup>78</sup> Crossley Ratings (1930-1935), and Hooper Ratings (1935-1950) were early measurement systems designed to determine audience size for radio broadcasts.

<sup>79</sup> Hilmes, *Ibid.* 28.

Hilmes also described this gender segregation as conforming to the “separate spheres” philosophy of Victorian times.<sup>80</sup> But in this case, creation of the often disparaged women’s place had a beneficial effect, resulting in the emergence of a space where women’s interests and voices were represented. It opened up many new opportunities for women to work in a business that remained overwhelmingly dominated by men.

By this time, Meserand was already something of a broadcasting veteran and she cannot be considered a direct beneficiary of this new gendered programming trend. She was, nonetheless, a marginal participant. Among the programs she oversaw as Assistant Program Director was the “Women’s Roundtable Series,” which brought prominent women together to discuss issues of the day.<sup>81</sup>

### *Early News and the Impact of War*

World War II brought Edythe Messerand an unexpected career opportunity. The war may have done more to change the roles and status of women in the American workforce than any other event in the first half of the twentieth century. The demands of an accelerated wartime economy and the absence of men who were being called into military service required that women join the workforce in significant numbers, and in jobs they had not previously occupied. Between 1941 and 1945, the female labor force in the United States increased by more than six million. A Labor Department review of the war’s impact described the situation as

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<sup>80</sup> Hilmes, “Women in Radio.” In Vol. 3 of *Museum of Broadcast Communications Encyclopedia of Radio*, edited by Christopher H. Sterling, (New York: Fitzroy Dearborn, 2004), 1550.

<sup>81</sup> Meserand, WPCF interview, 14.

“almost comparable to the vast changes in the era when machinery for manufacturing was invented and introduced.”<sup>82</sup> Historian William Chafe called the changes in work habits and participation during the 1940s a “turning point in the history of American women.”<sup>83</sup>

Edythe Meserand was among those women for whom the war created a watershed moment. The temporary retreat from the prevailing view of women’s abilities and appropriate roles opened the door to new opportunities. For Meserand, the prelude to war led her across a gender divide, and into the male province of the newsroom. The old expression, “in the right place at the right time” is an overused cliché. Nevertheless, it seems appropriate in describing the next chapter in Edythe Meserand’s career which took place at a critical juncture in radio’s development as an information source.

By the time she joined WOR Radio in 1937, at the age of 28, the airwaves of New York were still filled with music and entertainment, but news and information programming appeared with increasing frequency on program schedules. All but one of nine New York radio stations offered at least some news programming. A handful of the three dozen news reports listed on schedules for mid-October in 1937 were provided by the Press-Radio News Bureau, what today would be considered a

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<sup>82</sup> Mary Elizabeth Pidgeon, “Women Workers and Recent Economic Change,” *Monthly Labor Review*, December, 1947, 666. (*Monthly Labor Review* was the principal journal of analysis and research from the Bureau of Labor Statistics, an agency within the U.S. Department of Labor).

<sup>83</sup> William H. Chafe, *The American Woman: Her Changing Social, Economic, and Political Roles 1920-1970* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1972), 194. Chafe also described the ambiguities in working women’s wartime success, where new opportunities and work roles were acceptable, so long as they were considered temporary, and did not challenge traditional definitions of gender roles. William H. Chafe, *The Paradox of Change: American Women in the 20<sup>th</sup> Century* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1991), 154-172.

syndicated news service; the rest were locally originated.<sup>84</sup> It was in this changing environment, as Europe moved closer to the brink of war, that Edythe Meserand began the most important journey in her broadcasting career.

It was a journey she could not have imagined in 1926 when she began her radio adventure. News on the radio was rare through most of the 1920s. Where it did appear, it was generally in the form of brief headlines, read from the daily newspaper by the same announcer who would introduce the musical performance that preceded or followed. Eventually, newspapers would come to consider radio a serious competitor, for the attention of the audience but also for advertising dollars. Yet, newspapers also saw this new medium as a way to extend their brand: in mid-1922 there were fewer than a dozen radio stations owned by newspapers. By year's end, the number had jumped to nearly 70, out of an estimated 550 stations on the air.<sup>85</sup> The amount of news on the airwaves had not grown by much at the end of the decade, but radio operators were increasingly aware of the benefits: it was an inexpensive way to fill broadcast time, and it could be considered "educational" and thus helpful in fulfilling the station's public service obligation to the government agency which regulated broadcasting.<sup>86</sup>

As the technology for remote and live pick-up improved, there were more frequent examples of "event" broadcasting ... early evidence of radio's power to take listeners to the scene of the story. These included sporting events, such as the "Battle

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<sup>84</sup> *The New York Times*, October 15, 1937, accessed through ProQuest Historical Newspapers via the University of Maryland Library research portal on January 2, 2014. All subsequent references to The New York Times radio program listings were accessed using the same resources and on the same date.

<sup>85</sup> Newspaper ownership of radio stations cited in Bliss, *Now the News*, 14. Station count estimate is provided in Sterling & Kitross, 827.

<sup>86</sup> The Federal Radio Commission, which oversaw radio from 1926 until 1934, was replaced in 1934 by the Federal Communications Commission. See Charnley, *News by Radio*, 8.

of the Century” boxing match between Jack Dempsey and George Carpentier in July 1921, and political conventions, beginning in 1924. There were great moments of spectacle, such as the transatlantic flight of Charles Lindbergh in May 1927, and the return of the Byrd Antarctic Expedition in 1931.<sup>87</sup> There were also moments of high drama. The Lindbergh baby kidnapping in 1932 was described in *Broadcasting Magazine* at the time as “perhaps the greatest example of spot news reporting in the history of American broadcasting.”<sup>88</sup>

Early radio news borrowed its techniques, its product, and to a large extent, its performers from the dominant news medium of the time, the newspaper. In addition to the dozens of radio stations owned by newspaper companies, many others forged relationships with local newspapers. These cooperative ties served multiple purposes: newspapers published radio program schedules, making them more broadly available to the potential radio audience. At the same time, the brief news headlines being delivered on radio were seen as a form of brand extension, encouraging the listener to seek more information by reading the newspaper, with the potential to increase circulation.<sup>89</sup> What began as a mutually beneficial relationship changed, however, as the appeal of radio as the source for immediate news became evident. Newspapers grew protective of their audience and their advertising dollars, and increasingly looked on radio as a competitor. What followed is generally referred to as the “Press-Radio War.” Broadly defined, the dispute centered on the American newspaper

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<sup>87</sup> *Radio Digest*, January, 1931, 92.

<sup>88</sup> *Broadcasting*, March 15, 1932, 6, 16, 24.

<sup>89</sup> There’s some evidence to support this notion, especially during the 1940’s when newspaper circulation increased. News events drive interest, as evidenced by increased coverage of events such as the Normandy invasion in 1944, President Roosevelt’s death in 1945, which were heavily reported on radio, but which also drove newspaper sales to levels well above normal. Charnley, *News by Radio*, 10-11.



industry's efforts to maintain a monopoly on the distribution of news. The heart of the "war" is widely considered the period from 1933 until 1935 when negotiations between the two competing media resulted in formation of the Press Radio Bureau (PRB) which functioned as a clearinghouse for severely restricted news bulletins on radio. Under the terms of the Biltmore Agreement, so named because negotiations took place in New York at the Biltmore Hotel, radio networks agreed to stop their own news gathering and to limit news "periods" to two five-minute newscasts each day. These programs were provided by the PRB, which had full control over the timing and the content of the reports.<sup>90</sup>

One of the critical markers precipitating the fairly short-lived press-radio war may have been the 1932 election. Continuous coverage of presidential election returns on radio that November night may have put the final nail into the coffin of the newspaper "extra" which had been the exclusive vehicle for late-breaking news. On that night, Paul White, CBS radio's first director of news, said the special edition newspaper "extra" became an anachronism.<sup>91</sup>

It would be years before radio news would emerge as a substantial force in the media marketplace. Nevertheless, the mere presence of news on radio altered the journalism landscape. Gwenyth Jackaway has observed, "Radio, with its capacity to transmit news instantaneously to a mass audience, fundamentally changed the

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<sup>90</sup> Among the sources consulted for background on the Press-Radio War: Paul White, *News on the Air* (New York: Harcourt, Brace and Company, 1947), 30-43; Bliss, *Now the News, The Story of Broadcast Journalism*; Gwenyth Jackaway, "America's Press-Radio War of the 1930's: A Case Study in Battles between Old and New Media," *Historical Journal of Film, Radio and Television* Vol. 14, Issue 3, (August, 1994): 299-315.

<sup>91</sup> White, 36.

information ecology of the nation.”<sup>92</sup> This would become increasingly evident as the United States found itself on the brink of war.

### War Changes Everything

Broadcasting scholars and journalism historians do not agree on one date, or a single event to mark radio news’ arrival as the dominant force it would become. Most agree, however, that the marker falls somewhere in the period between the Munich Crisis in September 1938 and the September day the following year when the British and French governments declared war on Germany.<sup>93</sup> Gerd Horton called the Munich Crisis the moment when American radio took center stage as the major medium for foreign news.<sup>94</sup> In *News by Radio*, Mitchell Charnley said after Munich, “As the necessity for radio news became imperative, newsrooms began to spring up everywhere,” on radio stations around the country.<sup>95</sup> J. Fred McDonald identified September 3, 1939 as “the biggest news day in the history of radio.”

“Within the eighteen hours between 6 a.m. and midnight, listeners heard live transmissions of several profound events: the declaration of war against Germany issued by the British and French governments; an address to the British Empire by King George VI of England; a speech by British Prime Minister, Neville Chamberlain; a speech by President Roosevelt; a speech by the Canadian Prime Minister, MacKenzie King; news reports about the torpedoing of a transatlantic liner.”<sup>96</sup>

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<sup>92</sup> Jackaway, 14.

<sup>93</sup> September 3, 1939.

<sup>94</sup> Horton, 22.

<sup>95</sup> Charnley, 29.

<sup>96</sup> MacDonald *Don't Touch That Dial! Radio Programming in American Life from 1920 to 1960*, 61-62.

That Labor Day weekend in 1939 was, unquestionably, the key marker in Edythe Meserand's broadcasting adventure. As a member of the WOR press department, she was not directly involved in news programming, but on this weekend, extra hands were needed to handle the breaking news. Meserand and the others worked through the night to provide anxious listeners with the very latest developments, and on the day following the declaration, the audience could find news bulletins and commentary on every New York station. At least 20 newscasts or news commentaries appeared on the WOR schedule for Sept. 4, 1939. News bulletins were broadcast hourly, throughout the night. *The New York Times* daily radio listing of "Outstanding Events on All Stations" for September 4 mentioned just one musical program. On this day, the attention was clearly focused on the impending war.<sup>97</sup>

The growth of radio news programming in this period was dramatic: news broadcasts, commentary and "talks" occupied 6.7 percent of radio network program schedules in the late 1930s. By the mid-1940s the number approached 20 percent.<sup>98</sup> However, this provides only a portion of the emerging picture of radio news. Nearly one-half of stations on the air in this period had no network affiliation. Without access to national programming, it is not surprising that much of the news being broadcast originated at the local level. As previously mentioned, Susan Douglas has

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<sup>97</sup> Among the program highlights for September 4, 1939 "Round-Up of European Reaction," "Broadcast of President Roosevelt's Address on Foreign Situation," commentary from Dorothy Thompson and Raymond Swing on the "Foreign Situation," and remarks from Major Gen. William C. Rivers "Can America Stay Out of War?" *The New York Times*, September 4, 1939.

<sup>98</sup> Commercial evening network time devoted to "commentators, news and talks", figures from *Broadcasting Yearbooks, 1940-1946*, cited in Charnley, 31. Similar growth is evident in a 1945 study conducted by Duane Jones Company, a radio advertising agency, which found a 300% increase in network news programming between 1939 and 1944, also cited in Charnley, 31.

pointed out that eighty per cent of news on the air in this period came from local stations, and featured local newscasters and commentators.<sup>99</sup>

The historical record indicates that WOR was an early proponent of news as part of its programming mix. A limited number of news “periods” showed up on the station’s schedule as early as 1926. Weeks after the British and French war declaration in 1939, program listings showed at least a dozen newscasts on the station’s daily schedule. The numbers tracked higher as the conflict progressed, and even after the war ended, there were still at least twenty news broadcasts on WOR each day.<sup>100</sup> The station’s interest in this sort of programming was also evident from its involvement in the formation of the Transradio Press Service in 1934. This was designed to serve the news needs of non-network affiliated stations. The service positioned its product as a direct rival to the limited service then being offered by the Press Radio Bureau. After just nine months of operation, Transradio reached 150 subscribers and had become a serious competitor to the PRB.<sup>101</sup>

Rapidly moving developments on the European war fronts clearly fueled America’s taste for information, which radio was prepared to satisfy. News on radio was readily available in 80 percent of all U.S. households and a quarter of American automobiles in 1939. Five years later, the numbers approached ninety percent of homes and thirty percent of all vehicles.<sup>102</sup> Radio’s immediacy, with the ability to report breaking news developments, drew listeners into the moment, as did the first-

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<sup>99</sup> Douglas, *Listening In*, 174-175.

<sup>100</sup> Program schedules, as published in the *New York Times*, for various dates beginning in 1926 and running through 1945 were accessed via the University of Maryland Library Research Portal on numerous dates in 2013-14.

<http://search.proquest.com/hnpnewyorktimesindex/advanced?accountid=14696>

<sup>101</sup> Jackaway, 309.

<sup>102</sup> Household figures from the National Association of Broadcasters, vehicle figures from the Electronic Industries Association, cited in Sterling & Kitross, 862.

hand accounts provided from the scene of news events. The simpler and more accessible language typically used in broadcast reporting was also cited by some observers as key to radio's growing appeal.<sup>103</sup>

Over the course of the war, radio became the primary information source for Americans. Public opinion polls taken in 1939 and 1945 measured American's response to this question: "From which one source do you get most of your news of what is going on – the newspaper or radio?" In the first survey, newspapers were two and a half times more popular than radio. Six years later, in 1945, the situation was nearly reversed, with radio mentioned by 61 per cent of those responding. Thirty-five per cent identified newspapers as their primary news source.<sup>104</sup>

The popular fan magazine *Radio Mirror* featured a story describing radio's efforts in European war coverage which was almost hyperbolic in its description: "Never before in the history of the world has one medium played such a powerful role ... all during the war sleepless men, high in the buildings that house radio, stay at their posts to bring you these voices from everywhere."<sup>105</sup> Writing in 1947, Kenneth Bartlett described the growth and influence of radio broadcasting in the U.S. as "one of the most dramatic chapters in the history of communication." He went on to describe the rising volume of news on radio as "the greatest program change that has occurred in the last decade."<sup>106</sup>

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<sup>103</sup> See White, 1-13 and Lazarsfeld, *Radio and the Printed Page*, 145.

<sup>104</sup> The 1939 survey was conducted by Elmo Roper. The National Opinion Research Center at the University of Denver conducted the 1945 survey. Both are cited in White, 222.

<sup>105</sup> Louis Underwood, "Radio and the War: How modern broadcasting accomplishes the impossible and brings to you a Thrilling story that couldn't be told". *Radio Mirror*, December 1939, 35, 60.

<sup>106</sup> Kenneth G. Bartlett, "Social Impact of the Radio," *Annals of the American Academy of Political and Social Science*, Vol. 250, (March, 1947): 89 and 93.

Radio scholars of the time recognized the significance of these developments. In *Radio and the Printed Page*, among the earliest academic research conducted on radio, Paul Lazarsfeld wrote, “Young though radio news broadcasting is, it has rapidly established itself as a mighty channel of information for citizens of America. Today, with Europe at war, the radio as a news agency takes on momentous importance and responsibilities.”<sup>107</sup> Contemporary scholars have also identified the magnitude of the link between radio and war. Mitchell Stephens said “The Second World War gave radio news what the Civil War had given newspapers: a taste of the medium’s power to bring news home.”<sup>108</sup>

In the summer of 1943, with the United States fully engaged in the war, news figured prominently in the programming of all 20 New York radio stations, and by this time, Edythe Meserand was fully engaged in the process as a member of the WOR War Services and News Department. The number of daily news periods on the air in New York had jumped to 150. One station carried bulletins from *The New York Times* every hour on the hour from 8 in the morning until 11 at night. Commentators were now a mainstay across the dial and throughout the day, but especially at night. And in addition to New York station listings, the published radio schedules now showed programs available via shortwave from “London, Moscow, Melbourne, Berne, and Stockholm” and “from enemy sources in Berlin and Tokyo”<sup>109</sup>

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<sup>107</sup> Lazarsfeld, Paul F. *Radio and the Printed Page* (New York: Duell, Sloan and Pearce, 1940), 200. Lazarsfeld began his research while serving as head of the Princeton Radio Project. He moved to Columbia University in 1939, where his Office of Radio Research would eventually become the acclaimed Bureau of Applied Social Research.

<sup>108</sup> Mitchell Stephens, *A History of News* (Fort Worth: Harcourt Brace, 1997), 272.

<sup>109</sup> *New York Times*, 1 July, 1943, n.p.

The decisive moment in Edythe Meserand's career trajectory aligned with the larger transformation taking place in the lives of America's working women, and the arrival of new mechanisms for reporting, delivering and receiving broadcast news. This research explores a small piece of an enormous and complex picture formed at the confluence of these developments, by following one woman's passage on an unanticipated and surprising journey.

## Chapter 4: Early Life and Career of Edythe Meserand

Most of what is known of Edythe Meserand's childhood is found in oral history and other interviews conducted fairly late in her life. The scant biographical information included in her collected papers suggested that a deeper search into available public records was needed in an effort to piece together an early picture of the broadcasting executive she would become. Initially, the trail appeared unproductive, but ultimately it led to an unexpected discovery.<sup>110</sup>

The story Meserand shared, in various interviews, depicted a quiet and happy childhood in Philadelphia, with loving parents and an older sister whom she adored. She described a close family relationship, in which music played an important role. Her father loved all sorts of music, but especially opera, and would regularly take time to describe the scenes and explain the stories as the family listened together to his collection of Red Seal recordings. On most weekends, when the weather permitted, they would pack a picnic lunch and take the trolley to suburban Willow Grove Park, where they would spend the day listening to band concerts.<sup>111</sup>

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<sup>110</sup> The search for additional information on Meserand's background began with a simple internet query on the ethnic origination of her family name. This led to several historical database resources that seemed potentially productive. The Ellis Island Foundation genealogical database was especially helpful, as it led to the discovery of key travel and emigration records. This new information was useful, but it raised additional questions which then led to an examination of census records, naturalization documents, and property records. Additional supporting information was accessed through the genealogical websites ancestry.com and worldvitalrecords.com.

<sup>111</sup> In the early 20<sup>th</sup> century, Willow Grove Park in Willow Grove, Pennsylvania was one of the premier amusement parks and music venues in the country, hosting some of the best known band and orchestra leaders, including John Philip Souse and Walter Damrosch. <http://www.wgpark.com/>, Accessed 15 January, 2014.



Meserand recalled her mother, “like all Italian ladies,” had been taught to do beautiful handiwork, some of which was intended as part of a trousseau for Edythe. She also remembered a diary her mother gave her when she was barely able to write. Meserand claimed she recorded her thoughts and experiences, no matter how trivial, for many years.<sup>112</sup>

Along with an early interest in writing, Meserand described a flair for drama. She and some cousins who lived nearby would stage elaborate productions in the basement of her home. “I would write the plays...my cousin Lilly would do the costumes ... my other two little cousins, Tessa and Marie, would be the actors.”<sup>113</sup>

The picture she paints of those early years in Philadelphia is of a near-idyllic childhood, with the immediate and extended family unit as the centerpiece. “It’s always been very important to me, throughout my life,” she recalled.<sup>114</sup> It is a picture, however, that is, at best, incomplete. Her family story actually begins, not in Philadelphia, but in the small town of Petralia Sottana on the Italian island of Sicily.

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<sup>112</sup>Most autobiographical information comes from Meserand’s interview for the Washington Press Club Foundation’s oral history project, 1-4.

<sup>113</sup> Meserand, WPCF, 2.

<sup>114</sup> Ibid, 3.

*The Long Journey to a New Life*

**8**

**SALOON, CABIN, AND STEERAGE ALIENS MUST BE COMPLETELY MANIFESTED.**

**LIST OR MANIFEST OF ALIEN PASSENGERS FOR THE UNITED**

Required by the regulations of the Secretary of Commerce and Labor of the United States, under Act of Congress approved February 20, 1907, to be delivered

S. S. *Martha Washington* sailing from *Palermo* on *March 1st 1911* 190

No. of Pass.	NAME IN FULL	AGE	Sex	Rank or Profession	Religion	Country	City or Town	Final Destination
1	<i>De De</i>	<i>12</i>	<i>M</i>	<i>Student</i>	<i>Catholic</i>	<i>Italy</i>	<i>Palermo</i>	<i>New York</i>
2	<i>Misere</i>	<i>38</i>	<i>F</i>	<i>Housewife</i>	<i>Catholic</i>	<i>Italy</i>	<i>Palermo</i>	<i>New York</i>
3	<i>Misere</i>	<i>10</i>	<i>F</i>	<i>Child</i>	<i>Catholic</i>	<i>Italy</i>	<i>Palermo</i>	<i>New York</i>
4	<i>Misere</i>	<i>8</i>	<i>F</i>	<i>Child</i>	<i>Catholic</i>	<i>Italy</i>	<i>Palermo</i>	<i>New York</i>
5	<i>Misere</i>	<i>6</i>	<i>F</i>	<i>Child</i>	<i>Catholic</i>	<i>Italy</i>	<i>Palermo</i>	<i>New York</i>
6	<i>Misere</i>	<i>4</i>	<i>F</i>	<i>Child</i>	<i>Catholic</i>	<i>Italy</i>	<i>Palermo</i>	<i>New York</i>
7	<i>Misere</i>	<i>2</i>	<i>F</i>	<i>Child</i>	<i>Catholic</i>	<i>Italy</i>	<i>Palermo</i>	<i>New York</i>
8	<i>Misere</i>	<i>1</i>	<i>F</i>	<i>Child</i>	<i>Catholic</i>	<i>Italy</i>	<i>Palermo</i>	<i>New York</i>
9	<i>Misere</i>	<i>1</i>	<i>F</i>	<i>Child</i>	<i>Catholic</i>	<i>Italy</i>	<i>Palermo</i>	<i>New York</i>
10	<i>Misere</i>	<i>1</i>	<i>F</i>	<i>Child</i>	<i>Catholic</i>	<i>Italy</i>	<i>Palermo</i>	<i>New York</i>
11	<i>Misere</i>	<i>1</i>	<i>F</i>	<i>Child</i>	<i>Catholic</i>	<i>Italy</i>	<i>Palermo</i>	<i>New York</i>
12	<i>Misere</i>	<i>1</i>	<i>F</i>	<i>Child</i>	<i>Catholic</i>	<i>Italy</i>	<i>Palermo</i>	<i>New York</i>
13	<i>Misere</i>	<i>1</i>	<i>F</i>	<i>Child</i>	<i>Catholic</i>	<i>Italy</i>	<i>Palermo</i>	<i>New York</i>
14	<i>Misere</i>	<i>1</i>	<i>F</i>	<i>Child</i>	<i>Catholic</i>	<i>Italy</i>	<i>Palermo</i>	<i>New York</i>
15	<i>Misere</i>	<i>1</i>	<i>F</i>	<i>Child</i>	<i>Catholic</i>	<i>Italy</i>	<i>Palermo</i>	<i>New York</i>
16	<i>Misere</i>	<i>1</i>	<i>F</i>	<i>Child</i>	<i>Catholic</i>	<i>Italy</i>	<i>Palermo</i>	<i>New York</i>
17	<i>Misere</i>	<i>1</i>	<i>F</i>	<i>Child</i>	<i>Catholic</i>	<i>Italy</i>	<i>Palermo</i>	<i>New York</i>
18	<i>Misere</i>	<i>1</i>	<i>F</i>	<i>Child</i>	<i>Catholic</i>	<i>Italy</i>	<i>Palermo</i>	<i>New York</i>
19	<i>Misere</i>	<i>1</i>	<i>F</i>	<i>Child</i>	<i>Catholic</i>	<i>Italy</i>	<i>Palermo</i>	<i>New York</i>
20	<i>Misere</i>	<i>1</i>	<i>F</i>	<i>Child</i>	<i>Catholic</i>	<i>Italy</i>	<i>Palermo</i>	<i>New York</i>
21	<i>Misere</i>	<i>1</i>	<i>F</i>	<i>Child</i>	<i>Catholic</i>	<i>Italy</i>	<i>Palermo</i>	<i>New York</i>
22	<i>Misere</i>	<i>1</i>	<i>F</i>	<i>Child</i>	<i>Catholic</i>	<i>Italy</i>	<i>Palermo</i>	<i>New York</i>
23	<i>Misere</i>	<i>1</i>	<i>F</i>	<i>Child</i>	<i>Catholic</i>	<i>Italy</i>	<i>Palermo</i>	<i>New York</i>
24	<i>Misere</i>	<i>1</i>	<i>F</i>	<i>Child</i>	<i>Catholic</i>	<i>Italy</i>	<i>Palermo</i>	<i>New York</i>
25	<i>Misere</i>	<i>1</i>	<i>F</i>	<i>Child</i>	<i>Catholic</i>	<i>Italy</i>	<i>Palermo</i>	<i>New York</i>
26	<i>Misere</i>	<i>1</i>	<i>F</i>	<i>Child</i>	<i>Catholic</i>	<i>Italy</i>	<i>Palermo</i>	<i>New York</i>
27	<i>Misere</i>	<i>1</i>	<i>F</i>	<i>Child</i>	<i>Catholic</i>	<i>Italy</i>	<i>Palermo</i>	<i>New York</i>
28	<i>Misere</i>	<i>1</i>	<i>F</i>	<i>Child</i>	<i>Catholic</i>	<i>Italy</i>	<i>Palermo</i>	<i>New York</i>
29	<i>Misere</i>	<i>1</i>	<i>F</i>	<i>Child</i>	<i>Catholic</i>	<i>Italy</i>	<i>Palermo</i>	<i>New York</i>
30	<i>Misere</i>	<i>1</i>	<i>F</i>	<i>Child</i>	<i>Catholic</i>	<i>Italy</i>	<i>Palermo</i>	<i>New York</i>

FIGURE 1 Ship Manifest

Passenger list from the trans-Atlantic journey of the *Martha Washington* from Palermo, Italy. The ship arrived in New York in June, 1911, carrying the young Ida Miserendino and her mother, Gaetana.

Edythe Meserand was born Ida Miserendino on November 29, 1908, in Petralia, Italy. Ship manifests provide conflicting information on some of the details of her emigration.<sup>115</sup> Not in dispute, however, is that she arrived in the United States in the spring of 1911 as a two-year old with her mother, Gaetana, en route to join her father and older sister who were living in Philadelphia. Her parents had first come to the United States half a dozen years earlier, along with their older daughter, Maria.

<sup>115</sup> The arrival date is listed as June 11 and June 12, 1911. Most accounts indicate arrival in the Port of New York via the *Martha Washington* but at least one showed she travelled on the *Ancona* directly to Philadelphia. There are two spellings for the family name: Miserendino and Miserandino.



1930, nearly 1 in 5 women working in the United States was employed in a clerical position.<sup>118</sup> Virtually all of these young women were unmarried.

It was not possible to locate any of Meserand's education records since she did not name the high school or commercial school she attended. Further, an extensive search turned up no record that she took steps required for a legal name change, although it appears that she did since a U.S. passport issued in her new name appears on an airplane manifest from 1951.<sup>119</sup> What emerges from a review of her collected papers and published accounts of her work is a carefully crafted public story seemingly designed to conceal some of the most important aspects of her background.

Meserand came of age during an era when Italian immigration into this country was near its peak. Beginning at the turn of the century, Italian immigrants poured into the United States ... more than 2-million between 1901 and 1910.<sup>120</sup> Roughly one in five practiced a craft; most were laborers who quickly became a vital component in the U-S labor force. For many of these immigrants, a willingness to work at any available job reflected their desire to earn money quickly so they could return home. It also produced economic resentments, which only added to the ethnic and political prejudices they also faced.

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<sup>118</sup> Mary V. Dempsey, "The Occupational Progress of Women, 1920-1930," U.S. Department of Labor, Bulletin of the Women's Bureau, No. 104, 1933. Accessed via the Harvard University Library portal,

<http://nrs.harvard.edu/urn-3:HBS.BAKER:413339> 8 January, 2014.

<sup>119</sup> Manifest for Colonial Airlines Flight 101 from Kindley Field, Bermuda to LaGuardia Field, New York on May 27, 1951 includes the name Edythe Meserand with the notation "Born Italy. U.S. Passport #197918." Accessed via Ancestry.com, 22 January, 2014.

<sup>120</sup> Annual report of the Immigration and Naturalization Service, 1962, 43-44.

<https://archive.org/stream/annualreportofim1962unit#page/42/mode/1up>;

U.S. Bureau of the Census, Historical Statistics of the United States, Colonial Times to 1970, 105

<http://books.google.com/books/reader?id=6lhUAAAAMAAJ&printsec=frontcover&output=reader&pg=GBS.PA105>. Both sources accessed 15 January, 2014.

For Ida Miserendino, the timing of her transformation to Edythe Meserand is not discernable. No records of any attempt to secure a legal change of name have been located. It may be assumed, however, that she opted not to share details of her immigrant past and her status as a non-citizen for so many years, in order to fashion an image that portrayed her in the most favorable light.

By the time she began work at NBC in 1926, a new public persona had been adopted. All of the records from her work there and subsequently at WGBS/WINS, at Hearst Radio and at WOR are in the name, Edythe Meserand ... this, despite the fact that in 1938, her naturalization petition and the certificate she was granted five months later still bear the name and the signature of Ida Miserendino. Available documents clearly show that a Petition for Naturalization was filed with the U.S. District Court in the Southern District of New York on July 6, 1938. Meserand was, at this point, nearly 30 years old. She had been in the country for 27 years. She had been working for twelve years. Court records show an order of admission and naturalization certificate were issued on December 5, 1938.<sup>121</sup>

Because of the family's apparent financial difficulties, Meserand went looking for work immediately after finishing commercial school. She visited an employment agency and, during her initial interview, claims she was hired "on the spot."<sup>122</sup> Meserand's first job was with a French firm Pathe` which was, at the time, one of the largest film equipment and production companies in the world, and a growing competitor to the U-S movie industry. "They took a chance on me ... I was just out

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<sup>121</sup> *Index to Petitions for Naturalization filed in Federal, State and Local Courts located in New York City, 1792-1989*, New York, NY, USA: National Archives and Records Administration, Northeast Region, accessed via Ancestry.com, 12 January, 2014.

<sup>122</sup> Meserand, WPCF, 4.

of school,” she recalled.<sup>123</sup> Still a teenager, she was working in the high-profile entertainment industry, although her job seemed far from glamorous. She helped assemble promotional materials on Pathe’ products which included writing capsule descriptions of films which the company marketed for use in the home.<sup>124</sup> Meserand later described herself as lucky, and also unprepared for the writing work. She recalled having to do frequent rewrites, but her boss was apparently satisfied. She liked the job, describing it as “very pleasant,” but she hated the two-hour commute to and from the company’s offices in Jersey City, New Jersey.<sup>125</sup> Despite the tiring journey, Meserand might have continued working at Pathe’, except for a chance encounter that opened the door to an unexplored world.

### 1926 – A Network and a Career are Born

#### ***Announcing the National Broadcasting Company, Inc.***

National radio broadcasting with better programs permanently assured by this important action of the Radio Corporation of America in the interest of the listening public<sup>126</sup>

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<sup>123</sup> Ibid.

<sup>124</sup> In addition to the production of theatrical films and movie equipment, Pathe’ is credited with invention of the newsreel, the popular video highlight productions shown in theaters before the start of a feature film.

<sup>125</sup> Meserand, WPCF, 5.

<sup>126</sup> Headline from an advertisement announcing the debut of the NBC Radio Network, published in numerous trade publications in advance of the network’s premiere broadcast on November 15, 1926.



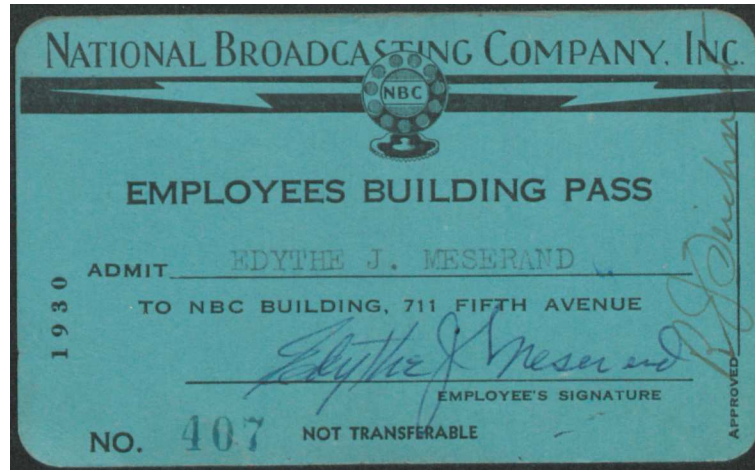


FIGURE 2 NBC Building Pass

Edythe J. Meserand employee building pass from the National Broadcasting Company, Inc. for 1930. Image used with permission: Edythe Meserand papers, Library of American Broadcasting, University of Maryland. Box 10 Folder 9.

Edythe Meserand did not have broadcasting or a career on her mind when she met George Engel, a Vice-President for the newly formed National Broadcasting Company, at a New York cocktail party in 1926. She was just 17, barely a year out of high school, with a few months of clerical training, and very limited work experience. In the course of the conversation, she mentioned her frustration with the long commute to and from her job, apparently prompting Engel to suggest she come to NBC for a job interview. Meserand initially rejected the idea. “I wouldn’t work there for anything, I hate biscuits,” she said, obviously confusing the established and well-known National Biscuit Company with the fledgling and virtually unknown broadcast operation.<sup>127</sup> Engel offered his business card, and urged Meserand to get in touch with NBC’s personnel director. She recalls being “scared to death” when she showed up for the interview, but she apparently impressed the woman in charge who

<sup>127</sup> Meserand, WPCF, 5.

said Meserand's Pathe' writing experience, even though brief, made her a good candidate for an open position in NBC's press department. Meserand could not have anticipated the consequences of the chance cocktail-party encounter. But the results of the casual meeting would produce the first marker along a career path that she would follow for decades.

Her job in the NBC press department was on the WEAF desk.<sup>128</sup> It was largely a secretarial position; she answered phones and gathered information to be included in news releases written by the man for whom she worked.<sup>129</sup> Some days, when her boss arrived late, which she later claimed happened on a fairly frequent basis, Meserand had to write the copy on her own in order to meet the early morning deadlines.<sup>130</sup> She apparently covered his absences well enough for a while. Eventually, however, the department supervisor discovered the deception. He told her "Never do that again ... don't you protect him."<sup>131</sup> George W. "Johnny" Johnstone, the head of the NBC press department, had called her to task, but at the same time, recognized the young Meserand had writing skills. Before long, she was promoted to the position of press liaison for NBC.

In this role, she handled arrangements for interviews and photo shoots, and was on-call and available to accompany the performers and attend the live performances that dominated early network programming. It was Meserand's job to make certain the growing number of reporters who were assigned to cover the radio

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<sup>128</sup> The NBC press department was subdivided into three units: the WEAF-based Red network, the WJZ-based Blue network and the Feature desk. NBC was formed through the merger of radio stations owned by AT&T and RCA. The company operated two networks; one chain was based at New York station WEAF and became known as the Red network; the second was based at station WJZ and was dubbed the Blue network.

<sup>129</sup> Meserand, BP, 5.

<sup>130</sup> Meserand, WPCF, 6-7, BP, 4-5.

<sup>131</sup> Meserand, WPCF, 6.



business had the very latest ‘scoop’ on NBC performers to feed to the expanding fan base of listeners who “would stop working, or arrange (commuting) connections in order to hear certain programs ... this is how important radio was.”<sup>132</sup>

By the mid-1920s, radio had become such an important social and economic force in the United States that most major newspapers around the country created separate radio sections. Specialized magazines which previously catered to amateur radio enthusiasts moved beyond coverage of the technical aspects of broadcasting to feature stories on radio personalities and programs. New fan magazines sprang up, filling the newsstands with “behind the scenes” reports on listeners’ favorite stars. There were column inches and pages to fill, and the young Meserand was in position to help.<sup>133</sup> She worked with the NBC staff photographer and two sketch artists, whose portrayals of radio personalities were frequent cover art in the popular radio press. She set up, tracked and regularly sat in on interviews with NBC performers. As she recalled, “any radio editor in the country who wanted an interview or had any request had to clear through me.”<sup>134</sup>

Meserand called the early years of NBC the “glamour years.” “Opening night for a radio program was like the opening night at the theater,”<sup>135</sup> she recalled. When visitors got off the elevator to see a performance in NBC’s Cathedral Studio, they arrived first, in an “elegant” reception area where they were greeted by a “very

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<sup>132</sup> Meserand, BP, 14.

<sup>133</sup> In New York City alone, there were nearly a dozen newspapers published on a daily basis in 1926, most of which had a radio editor. By the mid-1920’s, there were nearly 40 specialized radio magazines in print, serving a national audience of nearly one million readers, including *Radio News*, *Radio Digest*, *Radio Guide*, *Popular Radio*, and *Radio in the Home*. Magazine figures from Meserand Broadcast Pioneers interview, 6-71; “Fan Magazines,” in *The Encyclopedia of Radio*, Christopher Sterling, ed. 567-570.

<sup>134</sup> Meserand, BP, 6.

<sup>135</sup> Meserand, BP, 13.

beautiful receptionist, who wore only black.” On either side of the desk, which was clear except for a telephone and a bowl of flowers, were “two identically-sized pageboys, in uniform.”<sup>136</sup> Nothing in her past had prepared the young Meserand for life in the heady and glittery world of early network radio. She recalled “fantastic” parties, at the home of NBC stars like Vaughn deLeath. She also claims to have hosted parties for her work colleagues in what must have been a far more modest setting, at the home she shared with her mother on Lurting Avenue in the Bronx.<sup>137</sup>

Her sphere of influence was growing, however, Meserand did not yet recognize this could become her life’s work. “I didn’t know that I was doing a career; this was the most fantastic job in the world ... it was great fun.”<sup>138</sup> She was invisible to the average radio listener, but Edythe Meserand was beginning to make her mark in the industry. The radio columnists and celebrities she worked with on a daily basis came to rely on her as their point of contact and a key player at the new radio network.

Inside NBC, Meserand earned the respect and confidence of the man running the press department, George.W. “Johnny” Johnstone. As she recalled, “He always said, ‘If you have something that has to be done, give it to Meserand and she’ll find a way of doing it.’”<sup>139</sup> At this early point in her working life, she had found a supportive supervisor and a welcoming environment in which it seemed she could achieve professional success through hard work. Years later, Meserand remembered Johnstone as a tough taskmaster. “He piled more responsibility on your shoulders

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<sup>136</sup> Ibid.; Meserand speech to the Women’s Press Club of Albany, 8 December, 1976. Box 8, Folder 19. EMP. LAB.

<sup>137</sup> Meserand, BP, 13.

<sup>138</sup> Ibid., 6.

<sup>139</sup> Ibid., 10.

than you thought you could handle ... but you always came through. That's the way you learned."<sup>140</sup> She also recalled he was a generous mentor. "Everything that I learned in public relations and publicity I owe to this man," she said.<sup>141</sup> "Johnny taught me ... how to write a story, what to look for...he was the greatest."<sup>142</sup> This important relationship was a critical one in the early stages and would prove pivotal later in Meserand's broadcasting career.

### *The Key Roles of Women in Meserand's Early Career*

It was also during her tenure at NBC that she met many women working in or around the broadcast business who would have a profound influence on her professional life. Meserand had daily contact with women performers who were under contract with the network, and she worked regularly with a number of women who wrote the increasingly influential and popular radio columns for newspapers across the country.<sup>143</sup> Also, behind the scenes at the fledgling network, there were a number of women in positions of authority. The personnel director, responsible for hiring "top to bottom" was a woman,<sup>144</sup> as was the head of continuity, in charge of ensuring consistency in all on-air spoken word content.<sup>145</sup> Women also ran the library and the accounting department. But the women who would play a key role in Meserand's development, and who would serve as role-models and mentors to her in

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<sup>140</sup> Meserand speech to American Women in Radio and Television conference, 1 October, 1976, Saratoga Springs, NY. Box 10, Folder 1, EMP. LAB.

<sup>141</sup> Meserand, Broadcast Pioneers, 4.

<sup>142</sup> Meserand, WPCF, 6.

<sup>143</sup> Among the most prominent women writing about radio during this period, Kay Trenholm, Harriet Mencken, and Nellie Revell.

<sup>144</sup> Ruth Keeler.

<sup>145</sup> Helen Guy.

later years, were two of the top executives within NBC. Meserand points specifically to Bertha Brainard, whose job as program director for the network Meserand called “the most fascinating and fantastic job of all.”<sup>146</sup> Brainard was responsible for development of new programming ideas and for the recruitment of talent to fill the expanding broadcast day. Meserand credits Brainard’s instincts, her tenacious spirit, a willingness to experiment and a great respect for the audience as central to the network’s success.<sup>147</sup> “If a man had been in her position,” she said, “these things would not have happened. It was a woman who did it.”<sup>148</sup> Brainard was, by all accounts, one of the most influential female figures during radio’s formative years. For Edythe Meserand, she was a role-model and mentor, but also a powerful example of feminine professional style. “I loved the way she dressed,” Meserand said. “I wore enormous heels, just like Bertha Brainard wore. I even copied her (satin) blouses.”<sup>149</sup>

The other NBC executive who exerted influence at multiple stages in Meserand’s career was Margaret Cuthbert. As the Director of Talks for NBC, Cuthbert oversaw much of the spoken word programming for the network, which in the late-1920s and early 1930s would have included everything from educational and religious “talks” to shows targeting women, such as homemaking or cooking programs. Today, this type of programming would likely fall under the general heading of Public Affairs or Community Service. Meserand recalled her first encounter with Cuthbert. She was sent to the executive’s office to gather information

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<sup>146</sup> Meserand, WPCF, 7.

<sup>147</sup> Among the programs added to the NBC schedule under Brainard’s leadership, were broadcasts of the Metropolitan Opera, “The Goldbergs” and the “Walter Damrosch School of the Air.”

<sup>148</sup> Meserand, BP, 18.

<sup>149</sup> Meserand, WPCF, 7.

for a press release which she had been assigned to write. “I was scared to death,” Meserand said, (Cuthbert) “...was tall, very severe looking and very brusque in her speech.”<sup>150</sup> But Cuthbert made the young press aide comfortable, shared the necessary information and offered important words of encouragement. Meserand recalled “She told me ‘little girl ...you have a wonderful way with words ... you’re going to go very far ... try to think of radio as your career.’ ”<sup>151</sup>

Many years later, Cuthbert was among the small group of women, including Meserand, who were involved in the initial planning for the independent women’s organization that would become American Women in Radio and Television. It was in that context that she had the most profound influence on Edythe Meserand, who said she never would have gotten involved in the group were it not for Cuthbert’s personal request.

Meserand loved working with her NBC family, but also the growing number of radio editors from around the country with whom she dealt on a near-daily basis. What she did, and how she did it mattered to a widening universe of people in and around the radio industry. Eventually, as the demand for press coverage grew, Meserand was given a secretary to assist in gathering information, arranging interviews and photo shoots, and generally helping with all of the work she handled as the primary point of contact for press queries. She remembered earning “something like \$25 a week, which was a fantastic salary” at the time.<sup>152</sup>

Meserand’s personal recollections and published accounts of her work at NBC indicate that she had established herself comfortably in her role in the press

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<sup>150</sup> Meserand, WPCF, 9; BP, 16.

<sup>151</sup> Ibid.

<sup>152</sup> Meserand, WPCF, 11.

department. Supportive mentors encouraged her as she continued to refine her writing and organizational skills. She loved the work, and considered her NBC colleagues part of her “family.”<sup>153</sup> This must have been an exhilarating time for the young 23-year-old, but the exciting ride would come to an unpleasant end.

After four and a half years as an NBC publicist, Edythe Meserand was fired. Her departure was noted in several of the major newspaper radio columns, including the *New York Evening Graphic*, in November of 1931:

“Edythe Meserand of the NBC press department was fired because Frank Mason, VP, and a two-month old member of the organization, thought she was incompetent. Mr. Mason arrived with a fanfare of trumpets and has been making more noise than that and doing nothing ever since.”<sup>154</sup>

Some years later, Meserand described Mason as “an efficiency expert who was given free rein to consolidate the organization.” She also recalled Mason’s unusual request to provide him with details of her boss’s “extracurricular” activities. Insisting that she knew nothing of Johnstone’s personal life, other than the fact that he had a wife and two children, Meserand refused further comment. Mason continued to claim that she must know something, and “he insinuated a number of things that were a little off-color and I’m afraid I told him off, in no uncertain terms.”<sup>155</sup> Mason raised the stakes, warning that he “could make it impossible” for her to get another job in radio.<sup>156</sup> The young press aide was directly challenged by a powerful man who apparently believed he could have a major influence on the trajectory of her career.

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<sup>153</sup> Meserand, BP, 3.

<sup>154</sup> Jerry Wald, “Not on the Air,: *New York Graphic*, 25 November 1931, Box 1, Folder 10, EMP, LAB.

<sup>155</sup> Meserand, BP, 18.

<sup>156</sup> *Ibid.*; Meserand, WPCF, 12.

Meserand was an easy target, but she stood firm. Again, in comments many years after this took place, Meserand seemed to realize this could have damaged her professional future, but said she was “rather proud” of her behavior.<sup>157</sup> She remembers Mason conducting interviews with many NBC employees, but said he had developed a particular dislike for Johnny Johnstone. The new executive did not like the long-tenured press department boss; the young woman assistant who dared to speak her mind was fired as a result ... Johnstone kept his job.<sup>158</sup>

Meserand’s personal papers and trade press accounts published around the time of her dismissal from NBC reveal numerous examples of praise for her work. The head of RCA’s advertising and publicity department called her “a cheerful and intelligent aide (who) couldn’t have been a bigger help.”<sup>159</sup> Similarly, Kay Trenholm of the *New York Sun* praised her work: “We have come to rely upon you for the help we needed in getting prompt and reliable information ... and I am frank to admit that the only efficient cooperation I have had ... has come from you.”<sup>160</sup> The *New York Sun* radio editor expressed regret that he could no longer count on her “courtesy and thoroughness” in response to all requests.<sup>161</sup> The *Daily News* radio editor hailed her as “ingenious in providing accurate information ... a willing and enthusiastic collaborator...”<sup>162</sup>

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<sup>157</sup> Meserand, BP, 18.

<sup>158</sup> “NBC V-P Exec fires a non-VP’s executive secretary,” *Variety*, 1 December, 1931. n.p.

<sup>159</sup> Montgomery Wright to G.W. Johnstone, letter, 19 January, 1931, Box 1, Folder 2, EMP.; LAB.

<sup>160</sup> K. Trenholm to Meserand, letter, 23 November 1931, Box 1, Folder 2, EMP. LAB.

<sup>161</sup> E.L. Bragdon to Meserand, LTR, 25 November 1931, Box 1 Folder 2, EMP, LAB.

<sup>162</sup> Ben Gross to Meserand, LTR, 24 November 1931, Box 1 Folder 2, EMP, LAB.

Starting Over on the Local Radio Stage



Figure 3 Edythe Meserand Publicity Photo

This undated picture was probably taken in early 1932, shortly after Meserand began work at WGBS radio as the Musical Clock Girl. Her expression appears to reflect her oft-stated unhappiness with the on-air broadcasting role. The photo is part of the Meserand Papers collection at the Library of American Broadcasting, University of Maryland, College Park. Used with permission.<sup>163</sup>

With her reputation established and still intact, Meserand had a new job less than three weeks after her departure from NBC, She was hired by New York radio station WGBS to be the “Musical Clock Girl.”<sup>164</sup> From seven until nine each morning, Meserand, then 23 years old, hosted what might be considered a very early

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<sup>163</sup> Chuck Howell and Michael Henry to Merrilee Cox.

<sup>164</sup> WGBS was sold in October, 1931 to William Randolph Hearst, who changed the call letters to WINS in January, 1932. A common practice in early radio was to use call letters that bore some significance to the station ownership or affiliation. The calls WGBS reflected the ownership of Gimbal's Department Store. Hearst changed them to WINS, to reflect the connection with the International News Service, which he also owned.



version of a “morning-drive” radio show.<sup>165</sup> Radio programming was evolving, but in this case, the facilities in which the broadcast took place still resembled those of earlier days. Meserand recalled broadcasting from the top floor of the Hotel Lincoln. She worked from the bedroom where heavy cloth was hung on the walls to simulate a “studio” sound. The control room was located in the bathroom with the control panel in the tub. The engineer sat on the john to work the controls.<sup>166</sup> In between records, she provided time, temperature, traffic, and brief news updates.

During a period when few women appeared in radio announcing positions, reflecting the oft-expressed view that women’s voices were not acceptable on the air, Meserand drew praise for her work. The New York *Daily News*’ Ben Gross declared that her voice “shouldn’t be wasted talking to people” off the air.<sup>167</sup> The *Brooklyn Citizen*’s radio columnist said Meserand had not been known as a broadcaster, but had “a radio voice.”<sup>168</sup> Favorable comments such as these were not standard fare for a female announcer, and it appears Edythe Meserand could have successfully pursued work on the air. However, she made clear later, she wasn’t interested in being a broadcaster. “I did it under protest,” she said, “I did it in the early stages because it was demanded of me, but I didn’t really enjoy it.”<sup>169</sup>

What Meserand discovered she did enjoy was the creativity of her work behind the scenes. When she finished the “Musical Clock” show, Meserand began her

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<sup>165</sup> In oral history recollections, Meserand claimed the show was on the air beginning at six in the morning, however program schedules published in the *New York Times* shows this was a two-hour broadcast.

<sup>166</sup> Meserand, WPCF, 13; Meserand, BP, 20.

<sup>167</sup> Gross, *Daily News* radio column, n.d., n.p. Box 1 Folder 10, EMP. LAB.

<sup>168</sup> Murray Rosenberg, “Radio Days,” *Brooklyn Citizen*, 16 December, 1931, Box 1 Folder 10, EMP. LAB.

<sup>169</sup> Meserand, WPCF, 14.

duties as the station's assistant program director.<sup>170</sup> In this position, she was responsible for coming up with program ideas, and finding ways to put those ideas on the air. As she later described it, this wasn't a sophisticated process: she read the newspapers, looked for interesting stories and turned them into radio shows. She created "Mr. and Mrs. Reader," a breakfast time show featuring a man and woman engaged in informal conversation about current issues. She initiated a series featuring a symphony orchestra, a children's news "period," and she conceived and produced the "Women's Roundtable Series," a public affairs program featuring female newsmaker interviews and a panel of prominent women discussing the important topics of the day.<sup>171</sup>

This work, which occurred mostly out of public view, marked Meserand's entrance into radio programming, and although she did not realize it at the time, she later called it the real starting point in her broadcasting career. In this "wonderful training ground," Meserand began thinking about "the value of news and the importance of news on the air."<sup>172</sup>

In late May 1934, Meserand was named press chief and director of publicity at WINS. She later recalled moving in and out of programming and publicity roles on a number of occasions. This usually happened in connection with management changes at the station, which occurred six times between 1931 and 1935.<sup>173</sup>

This important chapter in Edythe Meserand's career came to an abrupt end in late October 1935 when she received a letter from the station manager, Burt Squire,

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<sup>170</sup> It would not have been unusual at the time for those working in radio to have more than one role. Such was the lot of many who worked in early radio and it is commonplace even today.

<sup>171</sup> Meserand, WPCF, 14; BP, 20-21.

<sup>172</sup> Meserand, BP, 20-21.

<sup>173</sup> *Variety*, 30 October 1935, Box 1 Folder 10, EMP. LAB.

that said in part, "...with regret, I find it necessary to dismiss your services. We are going into a specialized publicity campaign for the station and were it possible to have found a place for you in those plans, believe me, it would have been done."<sup>174</sup>

The letter went on to thank Meserand for her "fine service," and offered the writer as a willing reference to her abilities. The dismissal appeared to be the result of changed corporate priorities. This would not have been unusual in the broadcasting business in the mid-1930s and it remains a common practice today. However, Meserand described her dismissal from WINS as the one occasion in her career when she was the victim of overt discrimination. The real story of her departure, she claimed, involved more than the letter indicated. She described it in the most delicate of terms:

"We had a difference of opinion, shall I say. This was the first time that I ever felt there was real discrimination. ... I did not intend to have him (station manager, Burt Squire) in my life and he would not accept that. So this was the first time and the only time in my career that this sort of thing came up...I would never give him the satisfaction of knowing that I recognized what he was doing."<sup>175</sup>

Meserand's departure from WINS was noted in trade publications, including a *Variety* article from October 30, 1935, which pointed out that during her four years at the station, she had survived six changes in management. Her demonstrated ability to move from one task to another, from one department to another had served her well, and it would again. Once more, however, it would appear that Meserand lost a job because she was willing to refuse a powerful man's request.

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<sup>174</sup> Burt Squire to Meserand, LTR, 25 October, 1935, Box 1 Folder 2, EMP. LAB.

<sup>175</sup> Meserand, WPCF, 16.



FIGURE 4 Edythe Meserand Publicity Photo

This picture is undated, but was probably taken in the late 1930's. It is one of many professional portraits found in the Edythe Meserand papers in the Library of American Broadcasting. Box 2 Folder 1. Used with permission.

### *A Brief Diversion and a Famous Name*

The next stop on her career ride was relatively brief and interesting, perhaps, only because of the way in which it came to an end. The contacts Meserand had with Hearst Radio during her days at the Hearst-owned station, WINS, helped put her in touch with the company's corporate executives who were organizing a new radio station group. They needed someone to handle

promotion and publicity for their ten radio stations and within a reasonably short time after her firing from WINS, Meserand was hired to be Promotion Director for Hearst Radio, Inc., headquartered at 20 East Fifty-Seventh Street in New York.

It was another challenge, but by this time, Meserand showed no hesitation in grabbing the opportunity. “I had to learn what I was supposed to do. I wouldn’t let anyone down who was kind enough to have faith in me to give me the job.”<sup>176</sup> She took several evening courses at Columbia University to learn more about promotion, and she recalls visiting each of the ten stations so that she could see, first-hand, exactly what she was marketing. Over time, she was given increasing responsibility. Eighteen months after she was hired, a memo from the Hearst Corporate office informed all station managers that Meserand would handle a “new department in national sales,” created to showcase “outstanding” work being done at the local station level, to be shared for marketing and promotional purposes by the whole group. The memo went to 20 Hearst managers, including Burt Squire, the man who had fired Meserand from her previous post at WINS, and Elliott Roosevelt, the executive who would soon remove her from this position.<sup>177</sup>

Once again, Meserand had embraced the new challenge, but her career with Hearst Radio was short-lived. She was “reorganized” out of the position in 1937, ousted by a Hearst executive who had been called in to streamline the operation. Looking back, Meserand said this wasn’t unusual at the time. “It

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<sup>176</sup> Ibid., 17.

<sup>177</sup> Hearst Radio memo from J. Curtis Willson to All Station Managers, dated 27 July, 1937, Box 1 Folder 8, EMP. LAB.

wasn't only at Hearst, it was radio in general. It was a coming-of-age kind of thing."<sup>178</sup> Perhaps the Hearst house-cleaning wasn't surprising, but the man in charge wasn't your typical broadcast executive. The man given the task was Hearst Radio Vice-President, Elliott Roosevelt, second surviving son of the President, whose calling card was not his extensive experience in the radio business, but rather, his family name.

Roosevelt biographers have explored the complicated and often fraught relationship between FDR and the media mogul, William Randolph Hearst. In the highly acclaimed biography, *FDR*, Jean Edward Smith wrote "Hearst and FDR disliked each other personally, yet they often needed each other, and Hearst relished doing things for the First Family."<sup>179</sup> Elliott was a beneficiary of this largesse on a number of occasions, demonstrating that he was willing, even eager, to trade on the family name. Shortly after his father's inauguration in 1933, he took off for California, where he served, for a brief time, as an executive of the struggling start-up company, Gilpin Airlines. When the company went out of business, Smith says Hearst "rescued" the young Roosevelt, naming him as aviation editor for the *Los Angeles Examiner*.<sup>180</sup>

Barely two years later, Hearst named Elliott Roosevelt, then just 25 years old, Vice-President of Hearst Radio. His broadcasting credentials were

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<sup>178</sup> Meserand, WPCF, 18.

<sup>179</sup> Jean Edward Smith, *FDR* (New York: Random House, 2007), 403. Hearst named FDR's son-in-law John Boettiger publisher of the *Seattle Post-Intelligencer*. Boettiger's wife, Roosevelt daughter Anna, was made women's page editor of the paper, both at salaries Smith called "far in excess of prevailing pay scales."

<sup>180</sup> Smith, 405. Other published accounts indicate that Roosevelt was hired as aviation editor for all of the Hearst newspaper and magazine publications. *Broadcasting*, 1 May, 1939, 16; *New York Times*, 15 April, 1939, 21.

unremarkable. Roosevelt had served for several months as Vice-President and Sales Manager for Southwest Broadcasting Company, a small group of stations in Texas and Oklahoma. His entry into radio was duly noted in the trade press, but in the months that followed, his work drew no national attention.<sup>181</sup> That changed in early March 1936, when reports surfaced that Roosevelt was a key player in arranging the sale of some of the Southwest Broadcasting stations to the expanding Hearst Radio group.<sup>182</sup> Less than two weeks later, and less than six months after his career in radio had begun Roosevelt was named Vice-President for Hearst.<sup>183</sup>

His primary responsibility was for the group's stations in the Southwest, but gradually, his mandate extended across the country. In the late fall of 1937, Roosevelt visited Hearst stations in California on a housekeeping trip that resulted in a major "reorganization" and "retrenchment."<sup>184</sup> Although the exact date is not clear, it was also in 1937 when the long arm of Roosevelt's restructuring reached the Hearst Radio executive offices in New York, abruptly changing the career track of Edythe Meserand.

Her recollections appear, in slightly different form, in two oral history interviews. Meserand remembered showing up at her office one morning to find her secretary looking quite distressed. A man she did not know was sitting at her desk. "May I help you," he asked, when she walked into the room. Meserand's response:

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<sup>181</sup> The announcement of his appointment appeared in *Broadcasting*, 1 October, 1935, 18.

<sup>182</sup> *Broadcasting*, 1 March, 1936, 8.

<sup>183</sup> *Broadcasting*, 15 March, 1936, 90.

<sup>184</sup> *Broadcasting*, 1 November, 1937, 14.

“Well, may I help you? This is my office.”<sup>185</sup> But it was not her office any more. Apparently, according to Meserand’s account, following an evening out on the town with some friends, Elliott Roosevelt hired one of them to take her job.<sup>186</sup> With no advance warning, Roosevelt completed another round of housekeeping, and once again, Meserand was out of work.<sup>187</sup> It appears she was not the only one who was fired, but she later described the unceremonious and unexpected dismissal as “the worst kind of treatment.”<sup>188</sup> Meserand claims to have received a telegram from First Lady Eleanor Roosevelt “which, in a sense, was an apology” for the actions of her son.<sup>189</sup> Meserand told one interviewer the telegram could be found in some of her papers, however, after a thorough search conducted for this research, no such document has been located.

Elliott Roosevelt went on to become President of Hearst Radio. In the days following his appointment, the trade press trumpeted “Hearst Radio Shakeup” with “sweeping organizational changes” resulting in the resignations or forced departures of many, at all operating levels of the organization.<sup>190</sup> By the time he resigned his position at Hearst Radio in April 1939, Roosevelt had become a well-known and controversial broadcasting figure. He openly defied the National Association of Broadcasters, speaking out regularly on issues relating to censorship, broadcast regulation and government oversight. And in his capacity as a commentator for the Mutual Radio Network, he was openly critical of his father’s New Deal policies, and

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<sup>185</sup> Meserand WPCF, 18.

<sup>186</sup> Meserand, WPCF, 17-18; Meserand, BP, 23.

<sup>187</sup> In one interview, Meserand describes calling Jack Hearst to express her outrage and to request severance pay. She claims “he followed through ... he was very good about it.” *Broadcast Pioneers*, 23.

<sup>188</sup> Meserand, WPCF, 18.

<sup>189</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>190</sup> *Broadcasting* 1 January, 1938, 16; 15 January, 1938, 12.



opposed FDR's successful campaign for a third term. The controversies may have occasionally tested the relationship with his family, but they apparently did not destroy the long-standing and mutually beneficial professional relationship with William Randolph Hearst. In one of the articles announcing his resignation, it was reported that Elliott Roosevelt would soon begin a weekly radio column for King Features Syndicate, part of the Hearst media empire, although it is not clear that he managed to pursue this before he was commissioned as a captain in the U.S. Army Air Corps on his thirtieth birthday, September 23, 1940.<sup>191</sup>

Just over a decade into her broadcasting career, and not yet 30 years old, Edythe Meserand had been fired for a third time. The circumstances varied in each case, but a familiar pattern had emerged: a young and increasingly ambitious woman found herself among the victims of powerful male executives maneuvering to solidify their control of a situation. Following her dismissal from Hearst, Meserand remembers a phone conversation with another powerful man, but one whose influence in her life had been profoundly helpful.<sup>192</sup> George W. "Johnny" Johnstone, who helped set Meserand on a career track at NBC, "came to my rescue."<sup>193</sup> He opened the door to her next job opportunity, but she would wind up taking a big step back before she could move ahead.

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<sup>191</sup> *Broadcasting*, 1 May, 1939, 16; Chris Hansen, *The Times and Schemes of Enfant terrible, General Elliott Roosevelt* (Tucson: Able Baker Press, 2012), 5.

<sup>192</sup> Two accounts of this offer slightly different versions of the story. In the WPCF interview, Meserand claims that she called Johnstone. In the interview for *Broadcast Pioneers*, she says that he called her after reading a newspaper account of her dismissal. WPCF, 18, BP, 24.

<sup>193</sup> Meserand, BP, 24.

## Chapter 5: The WOR Days

When she walked into the WOR Radio offices at 1440 Broadway in 1937, twenty-eight-year-old Edythe Meserand encountered an important piece of radio history and once again, found herself on the bottom rung of the professional ladder. Her former boss and mentor, Johnny Johnstone was now in charge of the WOR Radio press department. He had arranged for Meserand to meet with Theodore Streibert, the former dean of the Harvard business school, who was now the Vice-President and General Manager of the station. It is unlikely that a top executive at a major radio station would typically be involved in the interviewing or hiring of a low level employee. In this case, it may have been as a courtesy to Johnstone. However, Meserand's recollections suggest something more. "He knew my background, he knew who I was and he couldn't get over the fact that someone who had an executive position ... an expense account ... would give up that kind of prestige for the lowest kind of job in the press department of WOR."<sup>194</sup> Meserand never offered a clearer explanation of why she took the job at such low pay.

As Meserand described the encounter with the station manager, it would be an understatement to say Streibert did not set a welcoming tone. During the nearly two-hour long meeting, she says the executive told her, over and over again, that women had no place in positions of authority and that she had no future in that type of role. "You will never get anywhere, you will never be an executive in this organization,"

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<sup>194</sup> Meserand, WPCF 19.

Streibert told her, “I want you to know that’s the way it is here.”<sup>195</sup> Many years later Meserand described this as one of the few times she “felt I was discriminated against because I was a woman.”<sup>196</sup> It was hardly an auspicious beginning, but Meserand would not be deterred.

In spite of Streibert’s unfriendly manner, she was hired as a clerk in the press department, performing “the most menial tasks” like filing and stenciling.<sup>197</sup> Her starting salary of \$25 a week was less than she had available in a weekly expense account at her previous position with Hearst Radio. But even more humiliating for Meserand: her immediate supervisor, the person to whom she reported was Johnstone’s assistant, a woman who had been her secretary a decade earlier at NBC. Meserand later recalled, “I was determined to do something there (at WOR), but in the early days, I was miserable.”<sup>198</sup>

By almost any measure, this was a step back in Meserand’s career track. From a mid-level management role at Hearst to an entry-level staff position at WOR, it appeared to be a case of starting all over again. In fact, this did mark a new beginning for Meserand, but what she did not know at the time was that her arrival at WOR placed her in a position to find what would become her professional dream -- planning and producing news and public affairs programs.

In order to evaluate the significance of Edythe Meserand’s work at WOR Radio, it is important to first look at the seminal role of the station in the early decades of American broadcasting. It was among the best-known of the “store”

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<sup>195</sup> Ibid.

<sup>196</sup> Judy Patrick “Radio Pioneer Reflects on Glory Days”, *The (Charleston, NY) Sunday Gazette*, 10 March, 1996, G2.

<sup>197</sup> Messerand, BP, 26.

<sup>198</sup> Ibid.

stations with a powerful “clear channel” signal that reached an audience well beyond the immediate New York metropolitan area. WOR also played a central role in the formation of Mutual Broadcasting, a unique radio “network” formed by a small group of independently owned stations.<sup>199</sup>

### *The Department Store Connection*

When it went on the air in February 1922, WOR was only the second radio station in the New York metropolitan area.<sup>200</sup> The inaugural broadcast originated from a 15-square-foot cubicle on the sixth floor of Bamberger’s Department store in Newark, New Jersey. The store had recently begun selling a line of radio equipment and the radio station was, effectively, a marketing device designed to stimulate sales. The crude set-up featured equipment and the broadcast studio in the same small space. Ben Gross, radio columnist for the *New York Daily News*, described it as a “cramped room in the corner of the sports goods and radio department” with a piano, a battered desk and “one microphone, which in reality was only a converted telephone transmitter with a large phonograph horn at the end.”<sup>201</sup> The room also included carefully placed rugs borrowed from the store’s carpet department which were used to deaden the sound.

Staffers shuttled between the broadcast studio and the department store selling floor. This division of labor would be a regular feature at other stations around the

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<sup>199</sup> The network concept was based on the interconnection of radio stations through the use of wires. Also known as “chain” or “web” broadcasting, this meant that a program produced in one location could be sent over lines to stations across the country.

<sup>200</sup> WJZ, which later became WABC, was the first.

<sup>201</sup> Ben Gross, *I Looked and I Listened* (New York: Random House, 1954), 54.

country which were affiliated with radio set retailers.<sup>202</sup> Even the station's first director, Jack Poppele, an engineer and the man principally responsible for putting the station on the air, was not immune from this double duty. Along with his technical responsibilities, Poppele worked as a salesman in the store's radio department. When he noticed the sets were selling briskly in the weeks before Christmas, he suggested to the marketing director that the station stay on the air on Christmas Day. Poppele volunteered to work the holiday shift, playing Christmas music throughout the day. He later recalled "we were the only radio station in America that was on that Christmas Day"(in 1922)<sup>203</sup> It was a marketing gimmick with a limited but captive audience and as a result, WOR was the first sound heard by many families who found a crystal set underneath the tree.<sup>204</sup> The following morning, newspapers offered enthusiastic support to WOR for "...this display of initiative."<sup>205</sup>

Less than a month after the station had gone on the air, the trade journal *Dry Goods Economist* declared that Bamberger's had "taken the lead among department stores in the radio field." At a time when the emerging medium of radio was heavily male-dominated, WOR deliberately targeted female listeners. This gendered approach to the new medium was consistent with the parent retail company's appeal to female consumers, and was evident from a review of the station's early program

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<sup>202</sup> By early 1923, at least twenty-nine department store radio stations were in operation. Ronald J. Arceneaux, *Department Stores and the Origins of American Broadcasting 1910-1931* (Athens: University of Georgia, 2007), 593. These included WNAC/Boston owned by Shepherd Stores, WIP/Philadelphia owned by Gimbel Brothers, WJAR/Providence, RI owned by The Outlet Company, and KYJ/Los Angeles, owned by Hamburger's.

<sup>203</sup> Interview with Jack Popelle by Marianne Macy, WOR Project, 19 April, 1982, 19 August, 1982, 17, in the Columbia University Center for Oral History.

<sup>204</sup> The commercial motive behind many radio stations in the industry's first decade was to provide incentive for the purchase of radio sets, either for the companies which manufactured them, such as RCA, or for the stores which sold them, in the case of WOR.

<sup>205</sup> Gross, 55-56.

lineup which included “lectures on cooking, on house furnishing and decoration, on sewing, on new style trends – all these will appeal to the woman in the home.”<sup>206</sup>

In its first year of operation, WOR hired Jessie E. Koewing to be the station manager, one of the first women to hold such a position. A trained concert violinist, she also served as a station announcer.<sup>207</sup> Poppele called her one of, if not “the first woman announcer.”<sup>208</sup> At this early point in commercial radio’s development, the barriers to women had not yet been raised, as a *Radio News* writer (a woman) explained in describing the qualities needed by a radio announcer, “a carrying voice of pleasant quality...a ready intelligence ... adept at planning programs ...tact and a pleasing personality.” The author continued, “Here is a field of endeavor peculiarly suited to women...even though most women’s voices do not carry as well as most men’s, it seems probable the ‘talkative sex’ will soon make its presence felt.”<sup>209</sup>

### The Clear Channel Advantage

After initially sharing a broadcast frequency with two other stations in the New York market, WOR was designated a “clear-channel” station by the Federal Radio Commission in 1928.<sup>210</sup> This meant that no other station could operate on the same frequency between sunset and sunrise. Media historian Christopher Sterling has

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<sup>206</sup> “Bamberger’s Takes Lead in Radio,” *Dry Goods Economist*, 4 March 4, 1922, 9, cited in Arcenau, 72.

<sup>207</sup> Golda M. Goldman, “His Mistress’ Voice,” *Radio News*, December, 1922, 1060.

<sup>208</sup> Poppele, Columbia University Oral History Collection, 64.

<sup>209</sup> Goldman, 1060, 1104.

<sup>210</sup> Federal Radio Commission General Order No. 40 set aside 40 of the 96 available radio frequencies, as “clear” channels. Cited in Sterling, ed. *Museum of Broadcast Communications Encyclopedia of Radio, Vol. 1*, New York: Fitzroy Dearborn, 2004, 342.

called these “elite” stations the “pinnacle” of radio broadcasting. Most were on or near the east and west coasts, and were given the privilege of operating without interference in order to provide night-time service to so-called “white areas,” the large interior land mass that could not receive ground-wave radio signals at night.<sup>211</sup> A few years later, WOR joined a select group of clear-channel stations given the authority to operate at the highest possible power.<sup>212</sup> The station inaugurated its new transmitter, along with a specially designed directional antenna in a ceremony on the afternoon of March 4, 1935.<sup>213</sup> A gala program celebrating the occasion was broadcast live from New York’s Carnegie Hall that night. It featured a wide variety of music and appearances by some of the best known stars of radio and the stage.<sup>214</sup>

The WOR signal now reached a large bean-shaped area (that stretched) up and down the east coast.<sup>215</sup> Poppele had worked for months with technicians at Bell Laboratories to develop this new type of antenna which allowed the station to target its signal to areas where the potential audience was greatest. Many years later, he recalled how difficult it was to convince the station owners to spend the money, but the investment proved worthwhile. In the year before the new antenna, the station did an estimated \$375,000 in advertising business. Poppele figured the new antenna would produce new business that could push annual revenue to \$1.2 million. It

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<sup>211</sup> Ibid.

<sup>212</sup> *Broadcasting*, 15 October, 1931, 8.

<sup>213</sup> President Roosevelt pressed a telegraph key at the White House to activate the powerful new transmitter at 3:30 p.m. *New York Times*, 4 March, 1935, 35; 5 March, 1935, 23.

<sup>214</sup> Among the performers in the gala broadcast, Will Rogers, Jack Benny, Bert Lahr and Ray Bolger. Another account of the event is included in Bill Jaker, Frank Sulek, and Peter Kranze *The Airwaves of New York* (Jefferson, NC: McFarland & Company, 1998), 153.

<sup>215</sup> Sterling, 2004. Vol. 3, 1556.

turned out he underestimated the impact by fifty percent. In the year following the change, revenues jumped to \$1.8 million.<sup>216</sup>

### *A Network of its Own*

WOR was the first station in New York and one of the sixteen original stations in the country to carry programming from the newly formed Columbia Broadcasting System, beginning in September of 1927. For a brief period the following year, WOR alternated with the Atlantic Broadcasting Company's WABC as the CBS outlet in New York. When William Paley became head of CBS in 1928, he offered to buy either station to establish it as the network's New York flagship. Bamberger was willing to sell WOR, but WABC was available for a lower price and so in September of 1929, WOR left the CBS network. The station remained independent of any network association until the fall of 1934 when it joined with WGN in Chicago, WLW in Cincinnati and WXYZ in Detroit to form the Mutual Broadcasting System.

These four powerful independent radio stations formed a cooperative network, in which the stations shared expenses and programming. Unlike NBC and CBS, networks that produced and distributed programming to owned and affiliated stations, Mutual programming was the collective product of the four founding stations' enterprise. Christopher Sterling, in his multi-volume encyclopedia of radio history, explained that "whereas the other networks originated most of their programming

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<sup>216</sup> Poppele, Columbia University Oral History Collection, 84.



from studios in New York and Hollywood, Mutual was a cooperative program-sharing venture whose member stations around the country provided most of the programming.”<sup>217</sup> From the beginning, Mutual represented a unique model in “chain” or network broadcasting: instead of owning stations, in this case, the stations effectively owned the network.

The quartet of stations comprising the original Mutual radio network were “powerful, strategically situated” broadcast operations.<sup>218</sup> Each station was highly successful in its own right, but each apparently saw advantages in the formation of a collaborative venture. Combining forces would allow for continued quality programming, but “at a fraction of what each was spending to create and deliver imaginative material.”<sup>219</sup> In two years, the Mutual Broadcasting System extended across the country. By January 1939, the network claimed 109 affiliated stations.<sup>220</sup>

WOR Radio became the “flagship” station for the network, building new facilities and expanding studio capacity to accommodate production of additional programming for both the station and the network.<sup>221</sup> The shared studio space at 1440 Broadway eventually included six studios designated specifically for news programming.<sup>222</sup> WOR would become the key contributor to the Mutual

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<sup>217</sup> Sterling, 2004, Vol. 2, 981-984. In actual practice, much of the Mutual network’s programming in the first two and half decades of its existence originated at WOR. There were, however, a few notable exceptions, such as the long-running and hugely popular series, “The Lone Ranger,” which was produced at WXYZ in Detroit.

<sup>218</sup> Jim Cox, “Mutual Broadcasting System,” *American Radio Networks: A History* (Jefferson, North Carolina: McFarland, 2009), 72.

<sup>219</sup> Ibid.

<sup>220</sup> Ibid., 77.

<sup>221</sup> The term “flagship” generally refers to the most important, leading, or highest profile member of a group.

<sup>222</sup> Ibid., 80.

Broadcasting System's news and information programming when the station expanded its news operation during World War II. Meserand's colleague and early mentor, Johnny Johnstone served as the "news chief" for the new network. He was described as a "scrappy" competitor to the much larger news operations at NBC and CBS. The upstart Mutual operated with a fraction of the budgets available to the other networks, but still managed to score occasional news "scoops."<sup>223</sup>

### *WOR's Growing Audience*

Armed with a powerful signal aimed at centers of population and a growing variety of popular programming, WOR was able to boost audience numbers exponentially over the years and was never hesitant to tout its success. In 1937, the year Edythe Meserand joined the station, WOR claimed to reach 14 per cent of the U.S. population, representing 22 per cent of the nation's spendable wealth. The guaranteed coverage area included all or parts of 63 counties in seven states.<sup>224</sup> In late January 1941, the station promised advertisers an audience of more than 4.2 million radio homes.<sup>225</sup> Beyond the guarantee, however, the station boasted that they

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<sup>223</sup> Ed Bliss, *Now the News: The Story of Broadcast Journalism* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1991), 29.

<sup>224</sup> Data comes from "Of Thee We Sing," a radio market analysis and sales promotion book, published in 1937 by Bamberger Broadcasting, the owner of WOR Radio. The station described it as "the most complete and intensive radio station market databook compiled to date." VF Stations File, Box 9. LAB.

<sup>225</sup> *Broadcasting*, 27 January, 1941, cover page advertisement.

reached listeners in 21 states, from Georgia to Kansas. The claim was based, in part, on the number of newspapers which included WOR in daily radio program listings.<sup>226</sup>

In its first radio station audience study, published in 1946, the Broadcast Measurement Bureau (BMB) found WOR had measurable audience in 18 states and four Canadian provinces, stretching up and down the east coast, from Maine to South Carolina, and well into the heartland, from Delaware to Ohio.<sup>227</sup> BMB provided audience information, on a paid subscription basis, to radio stations around the country. Listening patterns were broken down by state, county and city. Radio “families” were included in an individual station’s tally if they reported listening to the station at least once a week.

### *Climbing the Career Ladder from the Ground Up*

Edythe Meserand had arrived at one of the premiere radio stations in the country, but a decade after she had been hired as a press aide for the newly-formed NBC network, she was, effectively, back at square one in her new position at WOR, performing lowly secretarial duties and uncertain how she could live on her modest salary of \$25 a week.<sup>228</sup> Discouraged, and bored with routine tasks, she was determined to make the best of the situation and quickly put her organizational skills

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<sup>226</sup> The station identified 209 newspapers which included WOR in radio program lists, nearly half of which were published outside the guaranteed coverage area. *Broadcasting*, 24 February, 1941, cover page advertisement.

<sup>227</sup> Broadcast Measurement Bureau (BMB) Station Audience Study #1, 1946 listed the WOR daytime audience at 3.69 million. At night, BMB numbers showed a substantial increase to 4.8 million. Annual BMB reports are available at the Library of American Broadcasting.

<sup>228</sup> Meserand, BP, 25.

to work. Special Features, the common term for programming designed to address the interests and issues of the community, was, by this time, a regular component of the WOR schedule. Little information about these shows was logged, and Meserand saw an opportunity to create a record-keeping system that would showcase the work being done. She began compiling a monthly Special Features report of the station's public service efforts that was distributed to the sales, promotion and programming departments. Her supportive mentor, Johnny Johnstone, shared the report with top station managers, along with a hand-written note giving her full credit.<sup>229</sup> "If you did something that was good ... he (Johnstone) would praise you to the heavens," Meserand remembered.<sup>230</sup>

She had created a "job within a job" and once again, made an impression with her initiative and her ideas.<sup>231</sup> In fairly short order, Meserand was promoted to a post in the Special Features Department. But, a dramatic turn in world events was about to change the course of her career.

It was Labor Day weekend in 1939. As she told the story years later, Meserand had plans for a weekend sailing trip with a young lawyer to whom she was about to become engaged. They made arrangements to meet at the City Island Marina. But before the rendezvous could take place, the bells which signaled a news alert rang in the station's master control. In the absence of a fully-staffed newsroom, which was the case on this holiday weekend, the usual procedure was for the station

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<sup>229</sup> Dave Driscoll memo to WOR President McCosker, February 13, 1939, on which McCosker scrawled the reply "A good idea." Box 1, Folder 8, EMP. LAB.

<sup>230</sup> Meserand, WPCF, 20.

<sup>231</sup> Meserand, BP, 25-26; Meserand, WPCF, 19-20.

engineer to alert the press department. A staff member would check the news dispatch, and if it was deemed worthy, the copy would be taken to an announcer who would read it on the air.

The bulletin on this afternoon easily passed the worthiness test: September 3, 1939 . . . England declares war on Germany. Edythe Meserand and the other members of the press and special features department were called into action as the news ticker rattled regularly with updates. Without any notice to her family or to the young lawyer, she and the other staff members worked through the night. By the time the WOR announcer recounted the breaking news developments on the air the following morning, Meserand's mother had placed frantic calls to "all the hospitals and police stations thinking I'd been abducted or killed."<sup>232</sup>

In a glossy brochure, published by WOR to mark the station's fiftieth anniversary, Meserand described the weekend events a bit differently. She said she saw her fiancé waiting for her in the lobby when she was suddenly grabbed by one of the station employees and told to come upstairs. The end of the story remained the same: she left her young lawyer for her career. Needless to say, there was no engagement. This was, Meserand recalled years later, the moment when she found herself. "On that fateful day," she said, "I knew that news was what I wanted to do . . . I knew what my career was going to be."<sup>233</sup>

At this point world events, personal relationships and professional aspirations collided for Edythe Meserand. While she eventually might have pursued an interest

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<sup>232</sup> Meserand, BP, 28.

<sup>233</sup> Ibid., 27.

in news in any case, the momentous occasion of England's declaration of war seemed to propel her to a critical moment of discovery. Meserand identified a new professional path, turning away from the personal relationship to which she was about to commit herself. It was a profoundly important and life-changing choice.

### *Crossing the Gender Divide into the Radio Newsroom*

The young career woman and the still fledgling field of radio news were both about to come of age as escalating tensions in Europe altered normal life for millions. By the late 1930s the vast majority of American homes had at least one radio.<sup>234</sup> Four million cars had a radio installed. Music and drama were the most popular programming forms, but current events were becoming much more important to radio listeners. World War II created a hunger for news and radio was increasingly the place to get it. Local stations and radio networks responded to this interest by expanding their news operations.<sup>235</sup> As George Douglas put it, "the radio industry perceived there was a great mission out there waiting to be discovered."<sup>236</sup> It was an auspicious time for radio, and for radio news. And for Edythe Meserand, the timing proved pivotal.

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<sup>234</sup> Sterling & Kitross estimate in 1938 more than 91 per cent of urban homes and nearly 70 per cent of rural homes had radio. Half of homes in the country had at least two radios. 183.

<sup>235</sup> A Federal Communications Commission study conducted in December, 1938 found news constituted a relatively modest 8.31 per cent of all programming on U-S radio stations. No follow-up studies were conducted by the agency during the war years, but available figures from two radio networks provide an indication of the rapid growth of news in this period. In mid-October of 1943, NBC reported nearly twenty per cent of its program time was devoted to news. Just a year later, CBS calculated its news and sports programming at 27.1 per cent. These figures are included in William C. Ackerman's "The Dimensions of American Broadcasting," *The Public Opinion Quarterly*, Vol. 9, no. 1 (Spring, 1945): 15.

<sup>236</sup> Douglas, *Early Days of Broadcasting*, 112.

Although the station had provided limited news programming for several years, the executives at WOR decided they now needed a full-fledged news department which they created by splitting the press operation in two. Meserand's long-time mentor, Johnny Johnstone, remained in charge of the press division. Dave Driscoll, who had a college degree and journalism experience, was the logical choice to head the news unit. The lines were drawn and Meserand faced a difficult choice. Should she continue to work with Johnstone who, on numerous occasions, had encouraged her and supported her professional ambitions? Or should she set herself on a new path with a new boss and on which she had no real practical experience? Timing and events seemed to make the choice obvious. "The war was something we had to cover and we needed a news staff to cover it," Meserand recalled. "I was no longer interested in writing about styles or coverage of a parade ... I wanted to be in the news field."<sup>237</sup>

Meserand went to work in the News and Special Features unit, initially as secretarial assistant to Dave Driscoll. Under his leadership, Edythe and the one other person, a man, initially assigned to the new unit, began with a clean slate and the mandate to create a working news operation. "We all made suggestions," she recalled.<sup>238</sup> There was no existing broadcast newsroom template and so they created an operation designed to resemble that of a newspaper city room, with a central coordinating desk and a staff of reporters, writers and editors. Locating qualified staff was a challenge as increasing numbers of newsmen had been called into war-time service or assigned war coverage duty overseas. Nevertheless, the WOR

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<sup>237</sup> Meserand. WPCF, 22.

<sup>238</sup> Ibid, 24.

newsroom began to take shape with men hired from press associations and the region's many newspapers. Among them was George Brown who had worked for newspapers in Brooklyn, on Long Island and in suburban Westchester, New York. In the years before he became the station's newsroom manager in the early 1950s (either 1951 or 1952) Brown said "we brought practically the whole staff of the *White Plains Reporter Dispatch* to WOR..."<sup>239</sup>

Meserand recalls the newly constituted WOR newsroom as a 24-hour a day operation, with news writers, sportsmen, a feature writer and a city editor.<sup>240</sup> The workday was divided into shifts during which everyone on the staff had a specific assignment. Teletype machines, which delivered copy from news services, were moved from master control to the newsroom, close to the studio from which all news programs were broadcast. This meant news bulletins could be put on the air "in a split second."<sup>241</sup>

A review of *Broadcasting* magazine provides additional perspective on WOR's increasing emphasis on news and its growing status as a source for local and breaking news information. In February 1939 *Broadcasting* featured an article on coverage of the crash and sinking of a seaplane en route from New York to Bermuda. The focus was on coverage by the three radio networks, NBC, CBS and Mutual. WOR was the only local New York station cited for its coverage which included

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<sup>239</sup> Interview with George Brown by Marianne Macy, WOR Project, 16 October, 1981, 2-3, in the Columbia University Oral History Collection.

<sup>240</sup> Meserand, WPCF. 22.

<sup>241</sup> Ibid. 24.



“continuous news bulletins ... and an exclusive interview with the co-pilot.”<sup>242</sup> A lengthy article published in November 1940 outlined in great detail the plans to make radio’s coverage of the upcoming national balloting “the most extensive and elaborate of any Presidential election in radio history.”<sup>243</sup> Again, the spotlight was on the programming, logistics and staffing planned by the radio networks, however the article also details the “special method of handling election returns” at WOR and the schedule of news summaries to be broadcast “each half hour” throughout the evening.<sup>244</sup> By contrast, the magazine’s description of coverage planned by the only other local station mentioned, WFIL in Philadelphia, focused entirely on commercial sponsorship of the evening’s coverage by the Ford Motor Company Dealers of Metropolitan Philadelphia and New Jersey. The WOR newsroom model was an early prototype for local broadcast news operations. Timing and circumstances had provided Edythe Meserand with the opportunity to enter this new arena at the ground floor level. She would not remain there for long.

### *Greater Responsibility and a New Role*

In February 1941, Meserand was promoted. She had been identified simply as a member of the staff in the WOR News and Special Features department. Now, she was given specific authority over part of that unit’s programming. Trade publications including *Motion Picture Daily*, *Radio Daily* and *Broadcasting* took notice,

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<sup>242</sup> *Broadcasting*, 1 February, 1939, 20.

<sup>243</sup> *Ibid.*, 1 November, 1940, 22.

<sup>244</sup> *Ibid.*

describing her as “in charge of talks and features pertaining to women’s activities.”<sup>245</sup>

In the accounts she offered years later, Meserand used more expansive language; she called it a move from the position of “non-entity ... to a full-fledged member of the (special features and) news department.” This meant she could “cover stories, and book and originate programs.”<sup>246</sup> Even before the promotion, Meserand had taken on responsibilities not typically handled by a secretarial assistant. She had planned, produced and promoted programs and her role in the News and Special Features unit had been recognized. In a memo to station management in January, 1941, her boss, Dave Driscoll, recommended that she be given a ten dollar a week raise.

“Miss Meserand has done a man’s job in Special Features,” Driscoll wrote. “She has planned innumerable broadcasts, followed them through for production and promotion in the same manner as would be expected of a man. The fact that she is a girl should not be a salary handicap, in my opinion ... I realize it is difficult for a girl to raise her salary in WOR for budget reasons known to all of us, but nevertheless, I will be extremely disappointed if she does not receive a ten dollar a week raise as she deserves it. In a pinch, she could run the department and run it well.”<sup>247</sup>

It is not clear whether she received the raise, which would have pushed her salary to \$40 a week. What is apparent is the disparity in salary between Meserand and one of the men working in Special Features. In the same memo Driscoll also proposed a \$10 increase for Al Josephy who wrote and produced programs for the unit. This would have raised his weekly salary to \$70.

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<sup>245</sup> *Motion Picture Daily*, 19 February, 1941, 8; *Radio Daily*, 25 February, 1941; *Broadcasting*, 24 February, 1941, 32.

<sup>246</sup> Meserand, BP, 30.

<sup>247</sup> Memo to Mr. VanLoan from Dave Driscoll, 3 January, 1941, Box 1 Folder 9, EMP. LAB.

With the first stirrings of war in Europe, WOR station management had responded to the growing demand for news and information programming by creating the News and Special Features unit in September 1939. Evidence of its ongoing commitment to news was regularly touted in station publicity campaigns in the months and years that followed. It was also routinely recognized in broadcasting trade publications. The week following the Japanese attack on Pearl Harbor, *Broadcasting* magazine devoted most of its editorial content to radio's role in war coverage; of the twenty articles featured in the table of contents, sixteen were war-related. "Attack Finds Network News Setups Ready," was the first of many articles providing elaborate detail on radio's response to the unfolding drama. But it wasn't a network cited in the lead of this account. WOR was credited with being the first to broadcast news of the attack. "WOR, New York, at 2:26p.m. (EST) Sunday interrupted its description of the Dodger-Giant professional football game to read a United Press flash of the Japanese attack on Pearl Harbor."<sup>248</sup> The magazine reported the first network report came two minutes later on NBC.<sup>249</sup> One of the WOR sports announcers handling the broadcast of the game later recalled the events of that day. "Our first indication that something unusual was happening was when they announced (over the public address system) for Colonel Wild Bill Donovan to get in touch with his office, which was the Office of Publicity for the Government. Next

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<sup>248</sup> *Broadcasting*, 15 December, 1941. 9.

<sup>249</sup> WOR was the only local radio station mentioned in this article with the exception of KGMB in Honolulu which was providing on-scene accounts of the attack.

they announced that all enlisted men should report immediately to the nearest recruitment center.”<sup>250</sup>

### *Meeting the Growing Demand for News*

As the tempo of war increased, so too did the size and scope of the WOR newsroom. Among the many trade publication references tracking the growth of the department was this brief item in *Broadcasting* in January 1942 that described changes to the WOR “24-hour news service.” The article mentioned the appointment of two additional news editors and construction of a “modern newsroom and studios.”<sup>251</sup> Other than a department secretary, Meserand was the only woman working regularly in the newsroom before Pearl Harbor. That changed after the United States entered the war. Two women were hired as news editors. Meserand remembered both had “good qualifications” and did an “adequate job.” But one of the women did not stay for long. She wasn’t “dedicated ... not really interested in what she was doing ... the hours were too long,” Meserand recalled.<sup>252</sup> The other woman, Lucy Kraft, remained at the station for a number of years, but left shortly after the war ended to get married. This apparently left Meserand, once again as the only women working in the WOR newsroom.

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<sup>250</sup> “WOR Radio 1922-1982.” This was a special booklet published in connection with the station’s 60<sup>th</sup> anniversary. Box 1, EMP, LAB.

<sup>251</sup> *Broadcasting*, 12 January, 1942, 16.

<sup>252</sup> Meserand, WPCF, 26.

In August 1942, with the United States now fully engaged in hostilities, the station seized the opportunity to focus its programming efforts on the most compelling issue of the day. News and Special Features was renamed War Services and News. All regular station programming, from John Gambling's "Morning Gym Class" to the late night music show "Moonlight Savings Time," was recalibrated to include war and victory messages. "We were on the air twenty-four hours a day with news periods every hour and half hour," Meserand recalled. "We would break into any and all programs for news bulletins ... doing special programs whenever it was required."<sup>253</sup>

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<sup>253</sup> Meserand, BP, 32.

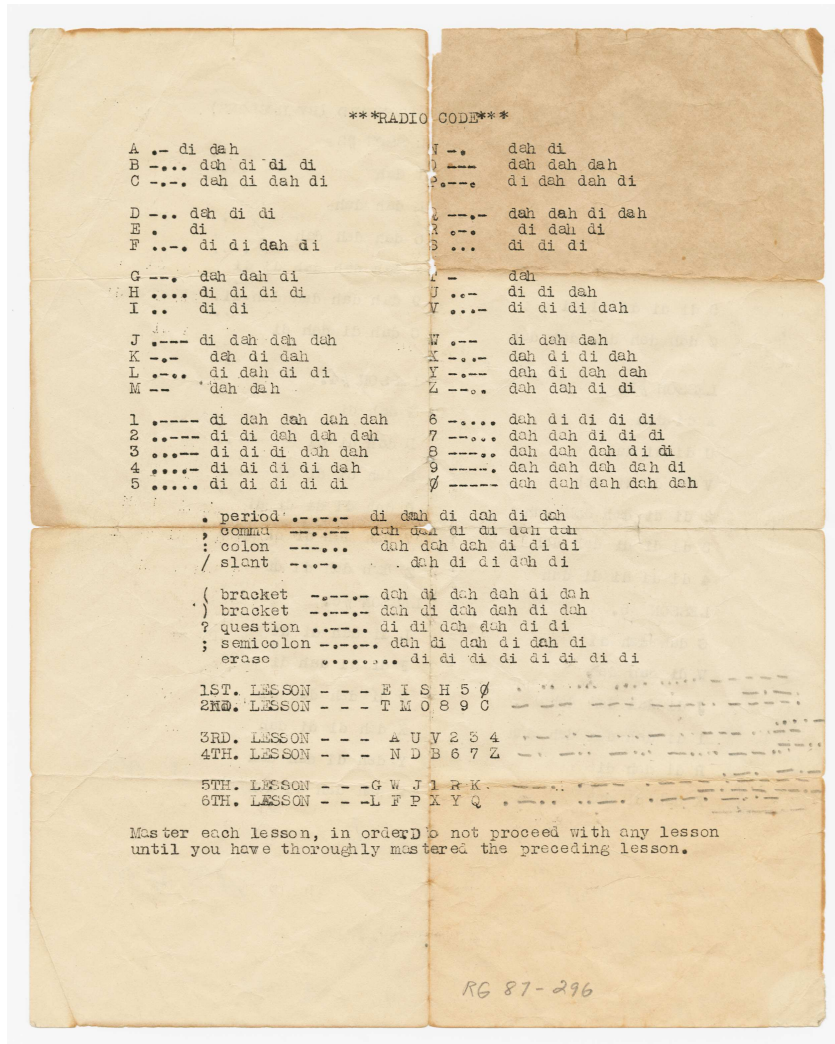


FIGURE 5 Morse Code Study Sheet

This is one of the homework assignments given to Edythe Meserand and other radio women who met regularly to learn morse code to be used in the event of a national emergency during World War II.<sup>254</sup>

About this same time, Meserand and a group of women working in and around New York media formed what they called a war emergency unit.<sup>255</sup> Once a

<sup>254</sup> Document is included in Meserand papers, Library of American Broadcasting, Box 1 Folder 5. Used with permission.

<sup>255</sup> The group began meeting in July, 1942. Available records do not indicate how long the meetings continued.

week the women met with an engineer who trained them in the use of morse code so that, in the event of an emergency, the women could send and receive coded messages. The women were given “homework” assignments ... sheets to memorize with key words and phrases, translated into code. A *Radio Daily* article listed the names of 27 women who were involved. It included many of the top women executives, journalists and broadcasters of the time: Bertha Brainard and Margaret Cuthbert of NBC, Dorothy Gordon of the *New York Times*, Agnes Law of CBS, popular talk host Mary Margaret McBride, commentator Lisa Sergio and Helen Sioussat of CBS.<sup>256</sup> The women never put their training to use, but Meserand later said it was “encouraging that a group of women of this standing would take time out ... to be taught these things.”<sup>257</sup>

### Women Advance in Wartime Radio

By the spring of 1943, traditional gender segregation in the American radio workplace was shifting, again. The growing numbers of radio men called into war service had created a range of new opportunities for women. The changes were such that *Stand By!*, the monthly publication for AFRA, the American Federation of Radio Artists, featured an article detailing the expanding roles for radio women. Outside the fields of acting and singing, where women had performed from radio’s earliest days, jobs as engineers, directors, producers and announcers, largely off-limits to women in

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<sup>256</sup> “Radio Women Form War Emergency Unit,” *Radio Daily*, July 2, 1942. n.p. Box 8 Folder 14, Meserand papers.

<sup>257</sup> Meserand, BP, 35.

the past, were now becoming available. In the publication, Edythe Meserand was identified as one of only three female executives making “excellent progress” in administrative positions. The other two were her earliest female mentors, Bertha Brainard and Margaret Cuthbert. At this point, Meserand had been promoted to the position of Assistant Director in the WOR War Services and News unit, but it was her creative work behind the scenes in the newsroom that drew special attention.

One woman in radio whose job has been, perhaps, most signally affected by the war is Edythe Meserand. Miss Meserand’s particular job is building, writing, and producing shows of spot news importance having to do with the war effort, as well as the booking of talks on government and charitable activities. In December of last year, a representative month, the department handled more than 300 shows, many of which were assigned to Miss Meserand.<sup>258</sup>

She was also singled out as “woman of the week” in a 1944 issue of *Radio Daily*, in connection with her work as the assistant director of War Services and News at WOR. “Varied and entailing great responsibility are her duties in this department ... much of her time is devoted to writing the scripts for these (war-related) shows which she also has a hand in producing. Her influence is felt, but never heard as she does not go on the air.”<sup>259</sup>

Not long after that article appeared, Meserand demonstrated another of the skills she had gained from her work behind the scenes. In June, 1944 she put together a compilation of reporting from the European front as the allies invaded Europe on D-

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<sup>258</sup> Thomas M. Heaphy, “Women in Wartime Radio”, *Stand By!* Vol. IV, No. 6, April, 1943, 6-7. Box 1, Folder 12, EM papers.

<sup>259</sup> Mildred O’Neill “Women in Radio,” *Radio Daily*, May 26, 1944, 6. Box 1, Folder 10, EMP. LAB.



Day. This type of broadcast is standard radio fare in contemporary terms, but at the time, it represented a novel concept and involved painstaking production techniques, as she later recalled:

We worked all night taping the stories that came in from SHAEF (Supreme Headquarters Allied Expeditionary Forces) ... hours and hours and hours of description. I said to Dave (Driscoll) 'I think we ought to take these disks, (in those days recordings were done on glass disk) and do a recap of the whole thing in one program.' So I went into the recording room, took the pieces and marked them with a red marker pencil. Then I took them downstairs to the recording division and worked with an engineer to piece all of this, hours and hour's worth, into one program.<sup>260</sup>

WOR has identified this and similar programs it produced as early examples of the radio documentary, although the term wasn't in use at the time. Nevertheless, the D-Day program and many of the others in which Edythe Meserand was involved, display the techniques now commonly associated with radio documentary broadcasts. In addition to single-topic programs, the station also produced an annual "Year-in-Review." Those retrospective programs are among the first of their type to incorporate the actual sound of news events and news makers into a scripted broadcast.

During the war, much of the new programming at WOR and on stations across the country was produced in cooperation with the government. One example, broadcast in December of 1942, focused on the Women's Army Auxiliary Corps (WAAC). This was an effort, Meserand recalled, to show women "there was an

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<sup>260</sup> This description incorporates Meserand's comments from three oral history interviews: WPCF, 34; BP, 40; Meserand interview by Marianne Macy, WOR Collection, Library of Congress.

avenue for them ... to serve their country other than by going into a defense factory and becoming 'Rosie the Riveter'".<sup>261</sup> "From the Scrap Heap to the Road," a documentary that aired in June 1943, described the processing of scrap rubber for tire recapping. Meserand and newsman John Whitmore travelled to U.S. Rubber plants in Connecticut and Massachusetts to observe the reclaiming technique. The trip was not without incident: a WOR press release on the show described Meserand as becoming "so engrossed in recording the sound effects, she failed to notice she was holding the mike much too near the rubber vat, and before she knew what was happening, she was sprayed from head to foot with the sticky contents."<sup>262</sup>

Less messy, but no less important to the war effort was the station's campaign on behalf of V-Mail, the common abbreviation for "Victory Mail." In a program broadcast in the fall of 1942, Meserand described the V-Mail process which was designed to save valuable shipping and cargo space for critical war materials. It involved the photographing of correspondence on microfilm for shipment overseas. The messages were then blown up into miniature letters that were about one-quarter of their original size for delivery. The National Postal Museum estimated that the 37 mail bags required to carry 150,000 one-page letters could be replaced by a single mail sack containing V-mail film. The corresponding weight was reduced from 2,575 pounds to a mere 45.<sup>263</sup>

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<sup>261</sup> Meserand, BP, 36.

<sup>262</sup> Box 3, Folder 1, EMP. LAB.

<sup>263</sup> Smithsonian National Postal Museum website. Accessed 2 May, 2012.

[http://www.postalmuseum.si.edu/exhibits/2d2a\\_vmail.html](http://www.postalmuseum.si.edu/exhibits/2d2a_vmail.html) NOTE: Eastman Kodak, which produced the film used for V-Mail, requested a copy of the script of the broadcast for placement in the Kodak museum.

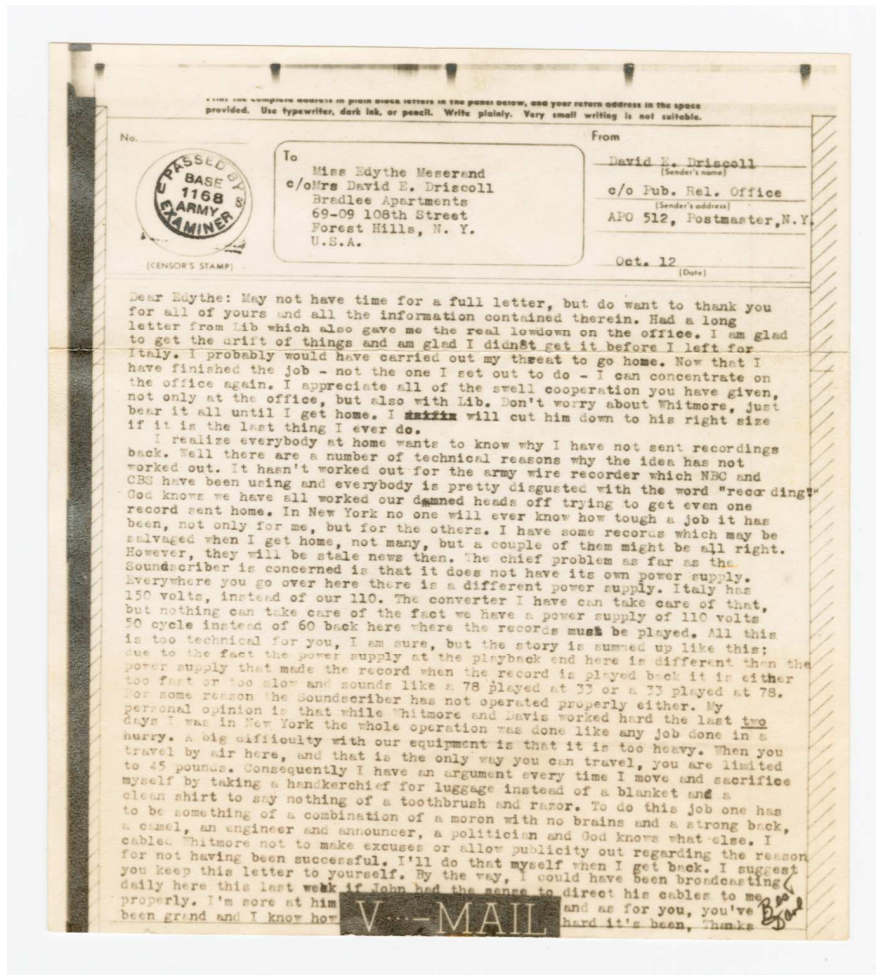


FIGURE 6 V-Mail or “Victory Mail”

This example of V-Mail from October, 1943 is one of several letters exchanged between Edythe Meserand and Dave Driscoll when he was overseas on assignment during World War II.<sup>264</sup>

Following her appointment as Assistant Director of War Services and News in 1943, Meserand claimed that she had “the same control over the entire department of

<sup>264</sup> Document is included in Meserand papers, Library of American Broadcasting, Box 1 Folder 2. Used with permission.

seventeen men that my boss had.”<sup>265</sup> Her office was adjacent to that of department head, Dave Driscoll. The wall between their desks featured a large, sliding glass window ... symbolic, perhaps, of open communication and transparency, but also of the seemingly impenetrable barrier separating Meserand and most other women from positions of highest authority.

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<sup>265</sup> Meserand, BP, 30. She also refers to “seventeen men” in the oral history interview conducted in 1981 which is included in the WOR collection at the Library of Congress. However, documents from her collected papers indicate that she may have misspoken, at least on some of the specifics. As previously mentioned, there were two other women who worked as WOR news writers at some points during the war. In addition, a memo from Dave Driscoll to the news staff following election coverage in 1946 is addressed to 14 recipients. 7 November, 1946, Box 1 Folder 8, EMP. LAB. The size of the unit may have changed at various point during the war, however the reference to “17” appears to refer to the size of the unit at the time of her departure in 1952.



FIGURE 7 Edythe Meserand at her desk at WOR Radio

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This publicity photograph was probably taken in the mid-1940's. On the other side of the glass is her boss, Dave Driscoll. Photo used with permission. Edythe Meserand Papers. Library of American Broadcasting. University of Maryland. Box 2 Folder1.

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When Driscoll went overseas on assignment, which happened frequently during the war years, Meserand was left in charge of the unit, often as the sole

authority, although on occasion, she shared responsibility with the newsroom supervisor.<sup>266</sup> During the height of the conflict, the Office of War Information (OWI) required that broadcasters review all copy to make certain it did not contain information that could prove helpful to the enemy. “Every bit of copy that went on the air, whether it was commercial or news, was screened by the news department twenty-four hours a day,” Messerand recalled.<sup>267</sup> In the WOR newsroom, Driscoll and Meserand were the only two people authorized to perform this task and so when he was away, singular responsibility fell to Meserand. “Nobody ever thought of the number of hours we put in or whether we had time to eat ... it was what you were doing ... covering the war.”<sup>268</sup>

In her recollections of life in the WOR newsroom, Meserand said repeatedly that she was treated as an equal by the men. The evidence suggests this was generally the case. However, she did cite one episode where her authority was directly challenged. As she told the story, one of the men in the newsroom apparently wanted her job and “worked in cahoots with the department secretary” to undermine Meserand’s position.<sup>269</sup> She recalled the man made unspecified accusations which he took to the radio station’s executive board.<sup>270</sup> A close reading of V-mail correspondence between Meserand and Driscoll sheds additional light on the situation. In a letter to her boss from September 1943, Meserand provided no details

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<sup>266</sup> Dave Driscoll memos to staff, various dates, including 9 July, 1943; 7 January, 1944; 20 July, 1945. Box 1 Folder 8, EMP. LAB.

<sup>267</sup> Meserand, WPCF, 32.

<sup>268</sup> Ibid.

<sup>269</sup> Meserand, WPCF, 31

<sup>270</sup> Oral history recollections and V-mail correspondence do not identify the man by both his first and last name. The reference to “Whitmore” would suggest that John Whitmore was the WOR newsman involved.

on the accusations, but referred to “skull duggery” and “picayune and childish” behavior.<sup>271</sup> In his reply, Driscoll offered praise for Meserand’s “cooperation” through what he described as a “hard” time. “Just bear it all until I get home,” he said, “I will cut him down to his right size if it’s the last thing I do.”<sup>272</sup> It is not clear how the situation was resolved upon Driscoll’s return from overseas, but it appears no one was demoted or fired. Meserand continued in her position as Assistant Director in the mostly-male WOR newsroom. Many years later, she called this her only experience with gender “conflict.”<sup>273</sup>

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### Maintaining the News Commitment

After the war, the department returned to its previous incarnation as News and Special Features, with a focus, once again, on affairs closer to home. The tense, war-ready atmosphere may have eased, but WOR’s commitment to news and information programming was undiminished. George Brown, a news writer who joined the station around 1945, recalled a move away from news commentary and interpretation and toward “straight news” reporting. News periods were scheduled at least hourly throughout the day and featured original writing by the WOR staff rather than the so-called rip and read practice of taking news copy directly from the wire services.<sup>274</sup>

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<sup>271</sup> Meserand to Driscoll, V-mail letter, 16 September, 1943, Box 1 Folder 2, EMP. LAB.

<sup>272</sup> Driscoll to Meserand, V-mail letter, 12 October, 1943, Box 1 Folder 2, EMP. LAB.

<sup>273</sup> Meserand, WPCF, 32.

<sup>274</sup> Brown interview, Columbia University Oral History Collection, 3-4. Brown had been a print and broadcast news writer for many years before joining WOR and became the newsroom manager at some point in the early 1950’s. The *New York Times* archive was reviewed for WOR program schedules. By 1947, according to a WOR advertisement in *Broadcasting*, the station was providing between 15-19 newscasts each day. *Broadcasting*, 17 November, 1947, 26.



Brown also recalled an increased emphasis on “local special events and special coverage,” and it was principally in this arena where Edythe Meserand continued to make her mark.

Long-form, documentary style programs became an increasingly important component of the WOR Radio program schedule. Meserand recalled the ideas for these programs often emerged from personal experiences, overheard conversations, or casual newsroom chatter, frequently between her and her boss. “Dave and I would sit by the hour and discuss some of these things, and out of these discussions would come programs like the series ‘Name Your Poison’.”<sup>275</sup> One of the broadcasts in this series examined the ease of access, without a doctor’s involvement, to powerful prescription medications. During lunch with a friend, Meserand had shared her anxiety about an upcoming speaking engagement. The friend quickly reached into her purse, pulled out a handful of pills, and offered them to Edythe, assuring her they would help ease the fear. Troubled by the casual offer, but sensing an opportunity, Meserand discussed the episode with Driscoll and work soon began on the “Name Your Poison” barbiturates program.

Another in the series examined cleanliness in New York City restaurants. The “undercover” legwork for this program involved careful coordination with the city’s Department of Health and with the radio station’s lawyers. Meserand visited eating establishments of all sorts, collecting cutlery and glassware in sterile containers which she then took to a laboratory for testing. “It was all documented ... there was proof,” Meserand recalled. When the program was broadcast, switchboards at the radio

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<sup>275</sup> Meserand, BP, 61.



station and the Department of Health “lit up like a Christmas tree because people were just so incensed that such uncleanliness existed in some of the very best of places.”<sup>276</sup> Meserand kept many letters from station listeners commenting on the show. Her files also include a letter from Dr. Israel Weinstein, New York Commissioner of Health, written to the station manager, expressing gratitude for the important “service to the public” and congratulating “Mr. Driscoll and Miss Meserand” for their work.<sup>277</sup>

In 1947, Meserand spent three weeks immersing herself in life on the lower East Side of New York, gathering information and interviews for a documentary on The Bowery and Chinatown. She recalled “practically living” with a Chinese family who welcomed her into their crowded apartment where three generations of family members lived.<sup>278</sup> A station press release on the program suggested the WOR mobile unit drew a great deal of attention. Street people “thronged” around the vehicle wherever it went, apparently believing the van was a soup kitchen.<sup>279</sup> This documentary was one of many programs produced by the WOR Special Features unit that were also broadcast nationwide on the Mutual Network.<sup>280</sup> It was among several dozen news and documentary programs donated to the Library of Congress in September 1984 as part of the WOR archival collection.

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<sup>276</sup> Ibid., 63.

<sup>277</sup> Dr. Israel Weinstein to Ted Streibert, 16 October, 1947. LTR. Box 1, Folder 2, EMP. LAB.

<sup>278</sup> Meserand, WPCF, 37-38; Broadcast Pioneers, 60-63.

<sup>279</sup> WOR Press release, n.d., 1947, Box 3 Folder 3, EMP. LAB.

<sup>280</sup> The booklet “Outstanding Broadcasts in the Public Interest, presented by Mutual” for 1947 listed several WOR originated programs, including “The Bowery and Chinatown,” “American Forum of the Air,” and “Meet the Press.” Pamphlet 5268, Library of American Broadcasting.

Based on materials from her personal files and press accounts of WOR special programming, Meserand was involved, in some capacity, with most of the station's documentary-style programming throughout the immediate post-war years. She also worked regularly on special event coverage such as political conventions, and on occasion, found herself at the scene of breaking news.<sup>281</sup>

In November 1949, Meserand booked a weekend trip to Bermuda. The getaway was intended as a brief respite from an especially busy time at work, but her planned rest was interrupted as soon as the plane landed at Kindley Field. Only a few hours earlier, survivors of a B-29 plane crash off the coast of Bermuda had been spotted. A boat which would link up with the recovery vessel was leaving very early the next morning and would be taking reporters to the scene. Meserand managed to get herself proper press credentials, borrowed clothes appropriate for the boat trip and, most important, she booked what she claimed was the only available transmission circuit from Bermuda back to the United States.

By the time the boat left the following morning, reporters from the other American networks had arrived. Meserand says she barely spoke to them and simply went about her business covering the story. When their ship returned to port, the other visiting correspondents boarded planes to fly back to the United States;

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<sup>281</sup> Meserand's claim to have been involved in coverage of all political conventions and Presidential elections after the war is supported by documents contained in her papers, and in press accounts of WOR and Mutual Radio activities. Various station memos and news releases from Meserand collection, Box 1, Folder 8 describe her involvement, as do numerous trade publication articles, including *Broadcasting*, 14 June, 1948, 80; 12 July, 1948, 75. Accounts of the Bermuda plane crash story which she described in the Broadcast Pioneers interview, 75, are also found in WOR station documents, including a press release dated 11/21/49. Box 3, Folder 1, EMP. LAB.

Meserand, meanwhile, went to the local radio station, prepared her report on the recovery of the B-29 bomber crew and filed the story on the line she had reserved. She had scored a “beat” ... her on-scene description of the survivors was broadcast hours before the other reporters had arrived back home, on WOR and on the Mutual Radio Network as well. A memo praising her work called her “a credit to this department. What you did was, of course, what anyone who knows you would expect ... a perfectly swell job of reporting ... a perfect job.”<sup>282</sup>

On many occasions and in various forums, Meserand described her relationship with Driscoll as one of working “hand in glove.” It was, she said “one of those fabulous combinations ... never out of balance ... I learned from him and he learned from me and there was never any rivalry.” She described the decision-making process as a collaboration: “Most of the things ... were done through conversations with Dave and me in the office.”<sup>283</sup> That collaborative relationship was also evident in the hands-on work of program preparation.

At various points during the war, Meserand assembled special broadcasts featuring highlights of major war developments.<sup>284</sup> When Winston Churchill visited New York after the war had ended, Meserand and Driscoll were on opposite ends of a live feed from the pier where the ship carrying Churchill docked. From the scene,

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<sup>282</sup> Dave Driscoll memo to Edythe Meserand, 21 November, 1949, Box 1, Folder 8. Her on-scene reporting was noted in various press accounts, including *Radio Daily*, 22 November, 1949, n.p. Box 1 Folder 10, EMP. LAB.

<sup>283</sup> Meserand, BP, 58.

<sup>284</sup> Meserand described the complex process of compiling highlights from D-day broadcasts in great detail in oral history interviews and in some of her speeches. Working with a station engineer, she edited several hours of recordings made from coverage into a condensed documentary-style program which was broadcast the following day. Because of the time difference, many of the most important developments occurred in the overnight hours and thus would not have been heard by much of the listening audience. *Broadcast Pioneers*, 40-41, Washington Press Club Foundation, 34-35.

and equipped with portable microphone and broadcasting equipment, he provided commentary as Churchill spoke to the gathered press corps. Back in the studio, she recorded the event and edited it into a highlight program which aired ten minutes after the event ended.<sup>285</sup> Several years later, Meserand and Driscoll worked side-by-side in the newsroom when President Truman issued his controversial order relieving General Douglas McArthur of his Far East command. “WOR was the only New York network station to give all-night coverage of the story. The extended emergency coverage was produced “under the direction of Dave Driscoll and Edythe Meserand.”<sup>286</sup>

Over the years, WOR’s programming was occasionally recognized with special citations or honored with awards, including the prestigious Peabody Award in 1940 for “American Forum of the Air.”<sup>287</sup> Edythe Meserand had a hand in the production of many, perhaps even most, of these presentations but you will not find her name listed on the plaques. Many years after the fact, she seemed fully prepared to take credit for her work, but at the time these programs were produced, she says, credit went to everyone in the unit. “The station walls were lined with them (awards),” she recalled. They were a “cooperative endeavor in our department ... we all shared in the glory.”<sup>288</sup> She made the same point in another interview, describing the productions as the work of “an ensemble”. “Everything we did in our department

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<sup>285</sup> WOR Press Release, 15 January, 1946. Box 3 Folder 1, EMP. LAB.

<sup>286</sup> WOR Press release, April, 1951. Box 3 Folder 1, EMP, LAB.

<sup>287</sup> <http://peabodyawards.com/> Accessed 29 January, 2014. Meserand described Ted Grannick, the program host, as “not the easiest man to work with,” and “absolutely haywire,” but said he eventually accepted her as a colleague, and over time, they became friends. Grannick moved the program to the NBC Network at some point after winning the Peabody Award. Meserand, *Broadcast Pioneers*, 37.

<sup>288</sup> Meserand BP, 40.

was done by the department, for the department. No one person was credited.”<sup>289</sup> A review of program scripts and newspaper accounts of these programs confirms this. It shows that most of them were described as “produced by the WOR News and War Services or News and Special Features Division, under the direction of (or supervision of) Dave Driscoll and Edythe Meserand.”<sup>290</sup> As she explained long after she left WOR, it was only near the end of her tenure at the station that she began to attach her name to the work she had done. “I didn’t think air credit was important...had I done it earlier, it would have done me a lot more good.”<sup>291</sup>

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<sup>289</sup> Meserand, WPCF, 40-41.

<sup>290</sup> Scripts for radio programs produced during this period are found in Box 3, Folders 13-22; Box 4 Folders 1-14. EMP. LAB.

<sup>291</sup> Meserand, WPCF, 40.



FIGURE 8 Edythe Meserand and a collection of children's toys

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Meserand is pictured in a room filled with toys and clothing donated or purchased as part of the WOR Christmas Children's Fund in 1946. Edythe Meserand Papers, Library of American Broadcasting, Box 3 Folder 9. Used with permission.

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### The "Golden Mike"

In one area of her work at the station, Meserand was happy to take full credit from the start. The WOR Christmas Children's Fund began as a "pet project" unrelated to her newsroom work. Over time, it became one of her proudest achievements. She described the story of how this began in great detail in oral history

recollections.<sup>292</sup> Following a late night of work at the radio station in November, 1945, Meserand and Driscoll went to dinner at a nearby restaurant. The owner asked for a ride to Bellevue Hospital where he planned to drop off Christmas candy to be given to needy and abandoned children being cared for at the hospital. Meserand was disturbed by what she saw. A nurse took her into the children's ward, and pointed out one boy who had fallen out of a window and another who was abused. "I'll never forget it as long as I live," she recalled, "I couldn't sleep that night."<sup>293</sup> The next morning, she approached Driscoll and proposed that the station launch a campaign to help. After receiving approval from the WOR Board of Directors, Meserand organized what became an annual effort to provide clothing and toys for New York area children. It was initially limited to Bellevue, but gradually extended to hospitals throughout the metropolitan area. In 1951, her last year directing the program, the station raised \$31,000 which was distributed to more than 10,000 children in 74 hospitals around the region.<sup>294</sup>

For this work, Meserand received *McCall's Magazine's* "Golden Mike" award, the first to honor women in broadcasting. She was cited, specifically, for her work as a broadcast executive.<sup>295</sup> Needless to say, there was extensive coverage in the trade press, including one column that pointed out Meserand's largely unheralded past. "Edythe has been one of the behind-the-scenes powers in both mediums (radio

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<sup>292</sup> Ibid, 43-47, Meserand BP, 50-53.

<sup>293</sup> Meserand, WPCF, 46.

<sup>294</sup> WOR Press Release, 17 January, 1952. Box 3 Folder 8, EMP. LAB.

<sup>295</sup> *McCall's Golden Mike* citation, Box 8 Folder 8, EMP. LAB.

and television) for a long time, and many who have received praise for performances did so because of her ability and judgment.”<sup>296</sup>

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### *A Taste of Television*

WOR had experimented with TV for a number of years before the switch was thrown putting WOR-TV on the air at 7 p.m. on October 11, 1949.<sup>297</sup> Initially, the station offered just 20 hours of programming a week; half of those were sports-related. It is not clear exactly when news and information were added to the station lineup. The evidence suggests at least some public affairs programming was included on the schedule within the first year. It also appears that most of the work involved in the production of these new shows was handled by Edythe Meserand and her radio newsroom colleague, Dave Driscoll.

The first of these programs may have been the “Mobilization Story,” a multi-part series of broadcasts airing on various dates in 1950 which dramatized stories depicting the nation’s mobilization for the war in Korea.<sup>298</sup> A much longer running show, WOR-TV Press Conference, made its debut March 28, 1951. The weekly program which Meserand produced was described by *Billboard* magazine as “a local version of ‘Meet the Press.’”<sup>299</sup> Two months into its run, *The New Yorker* called

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<sup>296</sup> C.J. Ingram, *The Jersey Journal*, 26 December, 1951, 16. Box 8 Folder 5, EMP. LAB.

<sup>297</sup> *Broadcasting*, 10 October, 1949, 48, 75.

<sup>298</sup> WOR-TV Press Release, 26 July, 1950; *Variety*, 9 August, 1950, n.p. Box 1 Folder 10, EMP. LAB.

<sup>299</sup> *Billboard*, 7 April, 1951, 8.



Press Conference “an exciting half-hour.”<sup>300</sup> Around that same time, another Meserand production went on the air. “Wildlife Unlimited” was produced in cooperation with the National Audubon Society, and was billed as an educational program “dealing with the conservation and exploration of wildlife in America.”<sup>301</sup>

This may have been the busiest period in Meserand’s 25-year-long broadcasting career. She was producing programs for WOR Radio and WOR-TV; she was handling administrative responsibilities for both stations, and she was wrapping up her term as the president of the first independent organization serving women in the broadcasting industry. The early history of that group and its evolution as a force in the industry are important in understanding how Edythe Meserand came to pursue that parallel journey.

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<sup>300</sup> *The New Yorker*, 2 June, 1951. n.p. Box 5 Folder 3, EMP. LAB.

<sup>301</sup> “Wildlife Unlimited” debuted on April 10, 1952. WOR-TV press release, April, 1951, Box 6 Folder 5, EMP. LAB.

## Chapter 6: Association of Women Broadcasters: The First Organization for Women in Broadcasting, 1942-1951

By her own account, Edythe Meserand was “not a joiner.”<sup>302</sup> In various forums over many years, she described her strong aversion to membership in groups of any type, but especially those which were segregated by sex. “I hated, hated women’s organizations with a passion,” she insisted, sounding faintly proud when she went on to explain that she had “successfully avoided joining any group” in her more than 20 years in the broadcast business.<sup>303</sup> It seems surprising, then, that she would ultimately go on to become the first president of an organization for women broadcasters. It apparently wasn’t a path she sought, but it became one that lifted her to a position of leadership and influence that she clearly welcomed.

In keeping with her proclaimed “dyed-in-the-wool” anti-organization views, there is no evidence, in trade publications or in her personal papers, to suggest Meserand had any involvement in a woman’s broadcast group before 1948. The registration list for a New York regional meeting of the Association of Women Broadcasters lists her as an attendee. In July of the following year, Meserand, along with two dozen other women, identified as members of the New York City chapter of the Association of Women Broadcasters (AWB), signed a resolution expressing condolences on the loss of a colleague who had died tragically in a plane crash. This

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<sup>302</sup> Meserand remarks to a regional meeting of the American Women in Radio and Television, Pittsburgh, PA. 10 October, 1953, Box 8 Folder 18, EMP. LAB; Meserand, WPCF, 41.

<sup>303</sup> Meserand remarks in Pittsburgh, 10, October, 1953, Box 8 Folder 18, EMP. LAB.

was published on the first page of the group's monthly newsletter.<sup>304</sup> It appears the first national meeting which Meserand attended was in June, 1950 in Cleveland, Ohio. Many years later, she recalled making the journey under protest and only after WOR General Manager Ted Streibert directed that she attend. It is not clear why Streibert insisted that Meserand be involved. It seems plausible, even likely, that he viewed it as in the radio station's best interests to show support for all NAB-backed activities.<sup>305</sup> When she returned from the convention, Meserand says she wrote a multi-page memo to her boss, explaining "why you shouldn't belong to the American Women in Broadcasting (sic)," and asking that he "never send me again."<sup>306</sup> As she remembered it many years later, he paid no attention to her appeal, and simply instructed that "when there is another meeting, you will please attend."<sup>307</sup>

In an effort to understand Meserand's organizational aversion, and more particularly, her strongly expressed dislike of women's groups, it is helpful to examine how carefully she crafted the descriptions of her early work. She stressed her determination, her work ethic, and her organizational skills, while seeming to avoid or at least understate any reference to the sexual divisions of labor which were so evident in the broadcasting industry.

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<sup>304</sup> "The Beam," July, 1949, 1. AWRP archives, Box 22 Folders 1-3, LAB. (NOTE: Multiple copies of some of the newsletters are included in all of the folders listed.)

<sup>305</sup> In 1950, the AWB was a subsidiary group operating under the auspices of the National Association of Broadcasters (NAB).

<sup>306</sup> The two most detailed accounts of this appear in Meserand interviews with the Washington Press Club Foundation, 41 and Broadcast Pioneers, 90.

<sup>307</sup> Meserand, WPCF, 41.

### Meserand and the Woman's Place in Broadcasting

Before her move into the news and public affairs arena at WOR, Edythe Meserand had spent most of her broadcasting career in the types of positions women typically occupied. At NBC, she was a press aide. She was hired at WGBS as the “Musical Clock” girl and assistant program director. When she moved to Hearst, she was in charge of publicity for the ten stations that formed the Hearst Radio group. Her recollections of this early portion of her career tend not to emphasize the gendered nature of the work she performed. In interviews and speeches many years later, Meserand focused on her ambition and the hard work that would propel her to a higher level of professional responsibility. Though she rarely talked about it, she had also been involved in women’s programming at several points in her career.

The “Musical Clock” hosting role was typically, although not exclusively, handled by a woman. In her other role at WGBS/WINS, as the assistant program director, she had her first opportunity to develop radio programs, which she later described as a “wonderful training ground” in the creative process.<sup>308</sup> There are no records in her personal papers that provide detail on the programs she helped to put on the air. But in oral history recollections, she makes brief reference to a symphony orchestra series, and to a “Woman’s Roundtable” program which was on the air for two or three years, beginning in 1932. “I would pick out subjects that I felt were of primary interest...and bring together four or five prominent women” for a roundtable

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<sup>308</sup> Meserand, BP, 20-22.

discussion.” Meserand recalled, “It was not primarily aimed at women” but was about “women who were doing things that were of benefit to everybody.”<sup>309</sup>

The setback in Meserand’s career after her firing from Hearst has been explored earlier in this research. Her accounts of that experience and of her early days at WOR paint a clear picture of her discontent. However, again, in oral history interviews and in other comments made decades after she left daily broadcasting, she chose to focus more on the accomplishments that pushed at the edge of her low-level status. In 1939, when she moved to the news and special features unit, she was a secretarial assistant to the man in charge. Her recollections mention this, but emphasize that she was one of only three people, and the only woman, who was involved in the process of establishing a fully-functioning WOR newsroom. Less than two years later, in 1941, she was given additional responsibilities that moved her further into the arena of radio programming. Trade press accounts took note of her promotion, but added language which Meserand never included in her own descriptions of the job. They described her as now “in charge of talks and features *pertaining to women’s activities.*”<sup>310</sup> A review of published program listings, and the program files included in Meserand’s papers does not suggest her work was limited to issues or news primarily of interest to women. It is, however, not possible to evaluate the extent to which this was her focus.

What does seem apparent is that Meserand continued to frame her role as one of increasing importance and responsibility within a department overwhelmingly

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<sup>309</sup> Accounts of the “Women’s Roundtable” series come from Meserand, Washington Press Club Foundation, 14, and Meserand, *Broadcast Pioneers*, 20-22. It is not clear from either account if Meserand actually hosted the program.

<sup>310</sup> Notice of her promotion appear in *Motion Picture Daily*, 19 February, 1941, 8; *Radio Daily*, 25 February 25, 1941, n.p.; *Broadcasting*, February 24, 1941, 32. Italics are mine.

dominated by men. Other than Bertha Brainard and Margaret Cuthbert, the two women who were her earliest mentors, Meserand's accounts of her career do not include women as major players along her broadcasting path. In the 1940s, we find the early signs that that would eventually change.

### *Expanding Roles for Women in Radio*

In the early part of the decade, women were entering the radio workforce in growing numbers and in a wider range of positions. Wartime mobilization certainly played a role, as the call-up of men into service created new opportunities for women in places generally unavailable to them after radio's earliest days. Broadcasting's gender divide had kept most women outside of the technical realm; now, they were routinely being trained to handle engineering work. This change was often heralded with a measure of fanfare in trade publications such as *Broadcasting and Radio Daily*.<sup>311</sup> But the transition wasn't always smooth. KMOX, a powerful network-owned station in St. Louis went silent for several hours in June 1942 when twenty-one of the station's technical employees, all men, walked off the job to protest the hiring and training of a woman engineer. The men said this violated the terms of their union contract. Station management called their protest a "wildcat strike" which had no basis "except discrimination against women at work in wartime."<sup>312</sup>

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<sup>311</sup> Throughout 1942 *Broadcasting* regularly highlighted women's movement into technical positions with photographs featuring captions such as "Engineer Shortage Solved," 17 August, 1942, 66; "Women's Touch," 14 September, 1942, 47; "Powered by Girls," 9 November, 1942, 28; "Chic Calibrator," 12 October, 1942, 24.

<sup>312</sup> *Broadcasting*, 22 June, 1942, 41.

Later that year, the same union, the International Brotherhood of Electrical Workers (IBEW), adopted an official wartime policy, which helped to open up the radio engineering field and union membership to women. It was, however, a temporary change. When the war ended, according to the policy, women workers were given six months to resign from both their jobs and from the union. In this field, as in many other journalism-related occupations, the gender divide was put aside, but only briefly, until the men who had occupied the positions previously came home from the war.<sup>313</sup>

In its lead editorial in the October 26, 1942 issue, *Broadcasting* took a cue from the federal government's War Manpower Commission when it urged station managers to set aside "old prejudices" and intensify recruitment and training of the "largest possible number" of women workers.<sup>314</sup> Nevertheless, the magazine's spotlight on women who were now being hired in jobs "outside their ken" seemed to portray the women as novelties, using language that regularly carried the tinge of long-standing gender bias. Three women who were hired as news editors for CBS were pictured wearing neatly tailored uniforms; their workplace was described as a "specially installed newsroom" in the window of a department store.<sup>315</sup> A "feminine" newscaster in San Francisco was lauded as the first woman to have commercial sponsorship of her program; she was also described as having "telegenic attributes."<sup>316</sup> And in Connecticut, the wife of a popular morning program host took

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<sup>313</sup> "IBEW Plans to Adopt Policy to Cover Women Technicians," *Broadcasting*, 14 December, 1942, 58.

<sup>314</sup> *Broadcasting*, 26 October, 1942, 36.

<sup>315</sup> *Broadcasting*, 3 August, 1942, 16.

<sup>316</sup> *Broadcasting*, 16 November, 1942, 49.

over after he enlisted in the Army; even though she had extensive radio experience of her own, she was described as “the woman behind the man behind the gun.”<sup>317</sup>

In 1942, Edythe Meserand was reporting, creating and booking special features programming. Some of these clearly focused on women, such as one on the Women’s Army Auxiliary Corps.<sup>318</sup> But it appears that her work had moved substantially into the more broadly defined news and public affairs realm. Meserand was operating in a mostly-male arena, and, by this point, other women were, as well. In her decade-by-decade review of women in twentieth century American radio, historian Donna Halper finds “a few more” serving in non-traditional roles in the 1940s. She mentions women sports announcers, a game show host, advertising executives and several women in commentator and news reporting roles.<sup>319</sup>

Nevertheless, in 1942, the first full year of U.S. involvement in the war, the majority of women in radio still handled jobs that fell on the female side of the gender divide. They were actresses and musicians, receptionists and secretaries, they oversaw educational and children’s programming, a few worked in publicity and advertising, but most of all, they hosted and supervised programs for women. More than sixty percent of those spotlighted in *Broadcasting*’s weekly feature “Meet the Ladies” in 1942 were women’s directors, women commentators or the hosts of women’s programs, such as “In a Woman’s World,” “For the Ladies,” and

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<sup>317</sup> *Broadcasting*, 10 August, 1942, 48.

<sup>318</sup> The full script for the WAAC program, broadcast in 1942, is located in the Meserand papers, Box 3 Folder 16, LAB.

<sup>319</sup> Among those identified by Halper were women commentators Dorothy Thompson and Eleanor Roosevelt and women news reporters Sigrid Schultz, Betty Wason, and Elizabeth Bemis. Halper, 101-102. See also David H. Hosely and Gayle K. Yamada (*Hard News: Women in Broadcast Journalism*: New York: Greenwood Press, 1987), Ch. 1 “The Early Days,” 1-25, Ch. 2 “The War Years at Home,” 27-59; Marlzolf, Ch. 4 “Women Share the Golden Voice,” 118-156.



“Happiness House.”<sup>320</sup> These shows still bore some resemblance to the earliest women’s programming which emphasized homemaking, cookery and the like. But over time, the genre had evolved from basic household ‘chatter’ to include topics that explored women’s roles more broadly, both within and outside the home. Newer versions of these programs created a welcoming space for women in a new version of the public sphere. They addressed topics relevant to women’s lives. The hosts were the mediators for a broader conversation about women’s interests and concerns.

The definition of “women’s issues” shifted during the war, when a growing number of women changed their focus to war-related topics. Many of these programs were aimed at helping women cope with the stress of wartime by providing them with information on how to help in the war effort.<sup>321</sup> The presumed significance and potential impact of these programs did not escape the attention of the government’s Office of War Information. OWI began publishing “The Women’s Radio War Program Guide” in the spring of 1943. It included a reader idea exchange with suggestions for war program themes.<sup>322</sup> This may have been the inspiration for WOR radio’s newly formed women’s advisory panel which met for the first time on June 15 of that year. A picture in *Broadcasting* magazine shows representatives of prominent women’s organizations, government agencies, and WOR station executives and personalities. Edythe Meserand was not included. There is no obvious explanation

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<sup>320</sup> These figures are based on a review of all weekly issues of *Broadcasting* for 1942.

<sup>321</sup> A small sampling of these programs aimed at housewives included “Women’s Place,” “Victory Mothers,” “One Woman to Another,” “Navy Wife,” “Women in Wartime,” and “Victory Parade.” These examples were drawn from program notes and reviews from various issues of *Broadcasting*, 1942-43.

<sup>322</sup> “OWI to Publish Guide for Women’s Programs,” *Broadcasting*, May 10, 1943, 18. NOTE: This may have been the inspiration for WOR radio’s newly formed women’s advisory panel which met for the first time on June 15, 1943. A picture in *Broadcasting* magazine on 26 July, 1943, 63, shows representatives of prominent women’s organizations, government agencies, and WOR station executives and personalities. Edythe Meserand was not among those pictured.

for this, but it seems likely that Meserand, now the second-in-command in the WOR newsroom, may have believed that she no longer had to concern herself with programs aimed at a female audience. Women also hosted programs specifically designed to appeal to the young male soldiers stationed at military bases around the country. These were often “wake-up” programs with names such as “Beverly at Reveille” and “WRNL Reveille Girl,” and featured “music and pleasant chatter,” aimed at boosting morale.<sup>323</sup>

Still vastly outnumbered in the radio workplace and still mostly pigeon-holed in “girls” jobs, these women got little respect. Ruth Crane Schaefer, among the earliest and most successful women in local radio, recalled that the woman’s director at a station who usually doubled as the on-air woman’s program host “was inescapably considered a character by her station associates ... the lowest branch on the organization tree was usually that of the woman.”<sup>324</sup> The “ladies” were not considered a significant force within the industry, but one radio woman saw a potential opportunity to organize and harness the power of women to push ahead.

### *Finding a Place for Women in the National Association of Broadcasters*

Dorothy Lewis was a familiar figure in the business, in particular to the men running the major industry trade organization, the National Association of Broadcasters (NAB). In addition to a career as a performer and producer for radio, she had been an active participant in New England women’s club circles where her

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<sup>323</sup> “Richmond’s Reveille Girl,” *Broadcasting*, 6 April, 1942, 42.

<sup>324</sup> Interview with Ruth Crane Schaefer by Pat Mower, 18 November, 1975, American Women in Radio and Television Oral History Project, 10. AT1058, LAB.

organizational and advocacy work propelled her to become a co-founder of the Radio Council on Children's programs.<sup>325</sup> On behalf of this group, and with funding from the NAB, Lewis conducted a nationwide survey of children's programming in 1940. She was also involved with the Women's National Radio Committee, which "...aggressively promoted its crusade for radio reforms."<sup>326</sup>

In 1941, Dorothy Lewis joined the National Association of Broadcasters as Coordinator of Listener Activities. She worked with NAB-established radio councils across the country which, among other things, monitored and evaluated radio programming and issued "accredited lists of good listening."<sup>327</sup> She worked with schools and colleges to organize listener groups and to encourage use of radio as an aid to education. The public service component of radio was clearly her primary focus and in 1941, the NAB embraced this work. The industry considered listener groups a helpful partner in determining the radio public's tastes and the needs and interests of their local communities. Under provisions of the Radio Act of 1927 and later, the Communications Act of 1934, U.S. radio stations were licensed by the federal government and as such, functioned under statutes requiring them to operate in a manner which serves "the public interest, convenience and necessity." The NAB was keenly aware of its public service obligations, but as a trade association that lobbied

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<sup>325</sup> Donald L. Guimary discusses the founding and work of the Radio Council on Children's Programs in Chapters 1 and 2 of *Citizen's Groups and Broadcasting* (New York: Praeger Publishers, 1975): 1-46.

<sup>326</sup> "Cleaning up Radio," *Business Week*, 18 May, 1935, 25, cited in Guimary, 26. The Women's Radio Committee was an advocate for "finer" radio programming with "educational and cultural value." The group also worked to "improve advertising content" and to remove, what it considered "objectionable features." This description is included in the *Radio Daily Yearbook*, 1942, 960, accessed online at <http://www.americanradiohistory.com/Archive-Radio-Annual/1942/901-1026-RA-1942.pdf>.

<sup>327</sup> *Radio Daily Yearbook*, 1943, 905, accessed online at [http://www.americanradiohistory.com/Radio\\_Annual\\_Master\\_Page.htm](http://www.americanradiohistory.com/Radio_Annual_Master_Page.htm).

on behalf of the interests of commercial radio broadcasters, the group also had substantial concern for radio's financial condition and the industry's bottom line. These divergent priorities may have contributed to the eventual split between the NAB and the women's broadcast group.

Shortly after Dorothy Lewis joined the National Association of Broadcasters (NAB), she suggested a get-together at the group's upcoming annual convention to discuss the possibility of forming an organization for women broadcasters.<sup>328</sup> At this point, most of the nation's radio stations had a women's program on the air. But as Ruth Crane Schaefer, who would become a charter member and later president of the group pointed out, "the women broadcasters had no opportunity to know or communicate with each other."<sup>329</sup> Establishing a mechanism to facilitate contact seemed an idea whose time had come.

The Association of Women Directors (AWD) was created at the 1942 NAB conference "for the purpose of bringing radio women together ... to discuss their common interests" and to make the women "more aware of what was going on in the industry."<sup>330</sup> It was described as "a clearing house for the exchange of ideas and techniques," designed to promote "projects affecting women broadcasters and women listeners."<sup>331</sup> In an industry in which men were the dominant and controlling force, it was called a "first step toward claiming recognition."<sup>332</sup> In her edited volume on women's press organizations, Elizabeth Burt points out that most of these groups

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<sup>328</sup> Halper briefly mentions the formation of AWD and its role in giving stations a voice on issues of importance to their communities. The entry mentions Dorothy Lewis only in passing. She is identified as vice-president of the NAB's Radio Council on Children's Programming, who "worked with the women directors in the group's formative years." 106.

<sup>329</sup> Schaefer, AWRT oral history project, 1. LAB.

<sup>330</sup> Ibid, 2.

<sup>331</sup> Marzolf, 143.

<sup>332</sup> McCauley in Burt, 27.

“were established at a time when women were excluded from positions of power and authority within the communications industry.”<sup>333</sup> Burt maintains that these organizations “provided the support women needed to function, to survive gracefully during times of little progress.”<sup>334</sup> The women in radio had no clear voice within the male-dominated NAB. Formation of the Association of Women Directors represented a limited effort to create a voice to represent their interests.

### The “Ladies Auxiliary”

The group was a closely controlled adjunct of the parent organization, with full and active membership open only to women working at NAB-member stations.<sup>335</sup> The first officers and board members were appointed, not elected. Virtually all funding for the group was provided by the NAB. And while the executive board of AWD had the duty “to take the initiative” in determining policy for the group, it was stipulated that all policy matters be presented first to the NAB.<sup>336</sup> Charter members were women’s program hosts and women directors who oversaw programming aimed at the female audience. Within two years, the group added an associate member category. This included women who worked in the allied fields of advertising, and government and corporate public relations. Associate members could attend meetings, but did not have full voting privileges and were not eligible for leadership positions.

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<sup>333</sup> Burt, xxvii.

<sup>334</sup> Ibid.

<sup>335</sup> According to the NAB’s annual report, 54% of all radio stations operating in the United States in 1942 were NAB members. This percentage remained fairly consistent in the early part of the decade.

<sup>336</sup> AWD Constitution and By-laws, as printed in the quarterly publication “The Beam,” Vol. 2, Number 3, July, 1944, Box 22 Folder 2, AWRT archives, LAB.

The subsidiary status of AWD was a reflection of the secondary roles women occupied in broadcasting during this period. Except for the relatively few women executives, like Bertha Brainard and Margaret Cuthbert, and the famous women broadcasters, like Mary Margaret McBride, women were far from equal partners with their male colleagues. Nevertheless, although limited in its scope and activities, formation of the Association of Women Directors marked a major step on the long road to recognition of women as broadcast professionals.

In the early years, the group's mission was only vaguely defined: it was a venue in which to distribute information and to share experiences and ideas. A review of its quarterly newsletter during the initial year of publication in 1943 provides a more detailed picture of AWD's work which included a heavy emphasis on backing the war and the public service aspects of women's programs. In a front-page letter in the first edition, AWD President Ruth Chilton called on members to "inspire, encourage and promote ... Americanism and ... the mission of our government."<sup>337</sup> A regular feature, "What are you doing for Uncle Sam?" provided a forum in which the women hosts and directors could share programming ideas. "The Beam" also served as a platform for recognition and celebration: "Honor Roll" and "Orchids for Programs" highlighted the work and accomplishments of individual members and their stations. "Chit Chat" and "Meet the Member" offered a personal connection, providing the women a shared experience which they had not known before.<sup>338</sup>

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<sup>337</sup> "The Beam," Vol. 1, Issue 1, April, 1943, Box 22 Folder 2, AWRT archives, LAB.

<sup>338</sup> "The Beam" was published quarterly from April, 1943 through April, 1948. Beginning in May, 1948 it was usually published on a monthly basis until January, 1951.

The newsletter reflected some of the prevailing themes during a period of shifting gender roles. By 1943, the United States was fully engaged in the war. Women were finding new opportunities in a variety of fields previously closed to them. Many of these women had entered their new workplaces without the benefit of prior experience or a cadre of helpful mentors to provide guidance and support. It seems likely, then, that the bonds of organizational attachment now available to radio women within AWD created something of a broadcasting “sisterhood” which was inconceivable in the gender-divided workplace of the previous decades.

The growth of the group in its early years shows the women broadcasters welcomed the opportunity to organize. Only about thirty attended the conference where the group was formed, but by 1944 membership had reached 650, and two years later, there were more than one thousand women in the group. In 1946 women’s program hosts and directors were joined by women executives and engineers. Associate membership was now available to women working in related fields outside the industry, such as broadcast advertising, public relations and radio production. Women working in government agencies with interest in radio were also now eligible to join as associate members of the group. The name was changed from the Association of Women Directors (AWD) to the Association of Women Broadcasters (AWB) to better reflect the changing nature of its membership and the group’s mission was more precisely defined:

“To promote the interests of women broadcasters and executives, encourage closer cooperation and increase opportunities for service

Act as a central agency through which to clear information relating to the work of women broadcasters

Formulate standards and principles for the work of women broadcasters throughout the United States in all fields of activity

Further the principles and objectives of the NAB.”<sup>339</sup>

### *Finding an Identity and Defining a Role for AWB*

The membership roster in 1946 exceeded 1000, even though some radio station managers were reluctant to let their women staffers join, expressing reservations about the group and the personal agenda they believed Dorothy Lewis was pursuing. After her years of work as an advocate for public service and educational radio programs, Lewis had become a divisive force within the NAB. Ruth Crane Schaefer who served as a regional director before serving as the group’s president recalled meeting resistance when she reached out to NAB-member stations in a campaign to expand the member base. Some managers, she said, took a “dim view” of Lewis’ efforts to use the group as a vehicle for her own “pet projects.”<sup>340</sup>

Lewis’ history with the Radio Council on Children’s programs and her work with radio listener groups to reform radio programming had raised a red flag, and not just for the men. “We were not opposed to ...listener groups, if handled in a constructive manner,” Schaefer recalled, “but we could not approve forming what might be construed as militant pressure groups. The last thing we needed was a lot of

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<sup>339</sup> AWB Constitution and By-laws, published in “The Beam,” Vol. 2, Number 3, July, 1944, Box 22 Folder 2, AWRT archives, LAB.

<sup>340</sup> Schaefer. AWRT oral history project, 4, LAB.



women's clubs demanding they-knew-not-what."<sup>341</sup> Many years later, Edythe Meserand remembered Lewis as a "wonderful lady," but also described her as "very aggressive ... and very pushy."<sup>342</sup>

These concerns notwithstanding, there is evidence that the NAB and, by extension, many within the commercial radio industry, initially saw value in these groups and the service the women could provide. An article in *Radio Daily* shed light on the role women broadcasters could play, calling them "valuable in building good public relations for radio stations and networks ... because women are socially minded. At heart, they are – for the most part – 'do-gooders.' Give them a 'cause' and they will run with it."<sup>343</sup> A similar sentiment had been expressed years earlier in a letter published in the very first edition of the AWD newsletter. NAB President Neville Miller praised the women's work with listener groups as "an invaluable asset to this industry."<sup>344</sup>

When they hired Dorothy Lewis to be the coordinator of listener activity, NAB executives could anticipate the sorts of pursuits in which she would engage; her past work had clearly defined her as a crusader for "discriminate" radio listening and "quality" programming. The watchdog-type groups with which Lewis had been associated provided a ready source of publicity for the industry, a pipeline to the listener, and a feedback loop on public tastes and attitudes. Essentially, these groups

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<sup>341</sup> Ibid., 6-7.

<sup>342</sup> Meserand, WPCF, 41.

<sup>343</sup> "Radio Women Invaluable, Kitchell Tells NAB Meet," *Radio Daily*, October, 1946, 1, 3. The article quotes Alma Kitchell who was, at the time, the president of the AWB.

<sup>344</sup> "The Beam," Vol. 1, Issue 1, April, 1943, 1, Box 22 Folder 2, AWRT archives, LAB.

did some of the heavy lifting for broadcasters, making it easier for stations to claim they were fulfilling their obligation to operate in the public interest.<sup>345</sup>

At the same time, the inevitable tension between radio's conflicting drives to public service and private profit, which Michelle Hilmes calls radio's "dual mission," took on new urgency in the post-war period of the mid to late 1940's.<sup>346</sup> The statutory mandate to serve the public interest was still in place, but the important role that radio had played in rallying the country in wartime was no longer center stage. Across the country, stations could now focus attention on the sweet taste of commercial success, and it was, indeed a bonanza. Radio advertising revenues rose steadily, nearly doubling between 1940 and 1945.<sup>347</sup> In 1943, radio broadcasting passed newspapers as a national advertising medium.<sup>348</sup> But the sort of programming that attracted significant advertising support and which paid the bills was generally not the type of program favored by listener groups.<sup>349</sup> If the NAB now considered listener groups a potential threat to its member-stations' bottom line, and if it linked Dorothy Lewis and the AWB to these groups, it is reasonable to conclude that this led the NAB to back away from its support for Lewis and for the AWB.<sup>350</sup>

While it is difficult to identify specific motives behind the NAB's willingness to help found and support the women's group, a close review of AWB publications

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<sup>345</sup> See especially Guimary, "Early Citizens Groups," 19-46.

<sup>346</sup> Hilmes, *Radio Voices*, 152.

<sup>347</sup> Radio advertising revenues in 1940 totaled \$215.6-million. In 1945, the figure jumped to nearly \$424-million. Figures are from McCann-Erickson research department, reprinted in various sources including Television Fact Book, and cited in Sterling and Kitross, 838-39.

<sup>348</sup> *Ibid.*, 233. Local radio advertising revenues are not counted in this tally, but the trend lines at the local level were similar.

<sup>349</sup> Women's serial drama (soap operas,) adventure dramas, situation comedies, and variety and musical programs were among the most popular types of shows of this period. Sterling, 180-200.

<sup>350</sup> Throughout her tenure at NAB, Dorothy Lewis continued to organize and work with radio listener groups but according to Ruth Crane Schaefer, this activity was never formally adopted by the AWD. See Crane, AWRT oral history project, AT1048, 7, LAB.

and the group's activities, as recounted in oral histories and the trade press, strongly suggests the male-dominated parent organization considered AWB a subsidiary service organization, something akin to a woman's "auxiliary."<sup>351</sup> Eventually, a number of the women grew increasingly uncomfortable with this relationship, but in the early years they welcomed an organization that aimed to serve the specific interests of the growing numbers of professional women broadcasters. At the same time, the heavy emphasis on support for the radio industry through public service and community-focused work by members of the AWB suggests an arrangement that benefited the NAB and its member stations at least as much as it did the women.

Ultimately, it seems less important to identify winners and losers than to conclude that for a number of years, the arrangement between NAB and AWB was a mutually beneficial one. The nation's radio stations tapped the energy and talents of women who were enthusiastic about the medium and its potential. The women found new career opportunities and an expanding universe of colleagues. Ruth Crane Schaefer, credits the NAB with playing "a very important role in enhancing the status of women in the broadcasting industry." By providing a venue for sharing and comparing ideas, women's radio horizons had expanded and their accomplishments were more broadly recognized. The women benefited from access to the resources of a large national trade association, including research, publicity and training and as a result, standards of operation for women broadcasters were developed. The NAB's

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<sup>351</sup> The term "ladies' auxiliary" is used to describe the AWB founding in an editorial in *Broadcasting* published 26 January, 1948, 49.

support, Schaefer says, enabled women to define themselves as radio “professionals.”<sup>352</sup>

“Rumblings” for Change and the Break from NAB

These mutual benefits notwithstanding, the relationship between the two groups began to show some strain by the late 1940s. Documentary evidence of the activities of AWD/AWB during its eight-year existence is limited.<sup>353</sup> Nevertheless we may draw some conclusions about the group’s changing nature in its final years.

The picture is one of an organization in transition. The women were increasingly focused on their roles and responsibilities as professional broadcasters and they sought a higher profile status within the NAB.<sup>354</sup> The AWB’s early focus had been on programming for women listeners, reflecting the primary concerns of a membership composed largely of the hosts and directors of these programs. The topics ranged from home, health and handicrafts to food, fashion and family. Generally, however, the focus was on women’s interior lives ... subjects which pioneering broadcaster Judith Waller described as “anything that’s pertinent to the home and community life of an American woman or which can help her to be a more

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<sup>352</sup> Schaefer, AWRT oral history project, 4-5, LAB.

<sup>353</sup> Most of the limited archival materials relating to AWB are included in Box 22 of the AWRT archives at the Library of American Broadcasting. The collection also includes several picture albums documenting the group’s activities. Box 1 of the Meserand papers includes a limited amount of correspondence dealing with AWB. Several oral histories, conducted as part of the AWRT Oral History Project, provide some additional detail. Historian Elizabeth Burt has pointed out that “records of women and women’s groups are rarely thought to be of enough importance to be kept, preserved, and archived,” and those few that do exist are “generally incomplete and scattered.” Burt, *Women’s Press Organizations*, xii.

<sup>354</sup> Ruth Crane letter to AWB executive committee dated 12 January, 1949. Box 22 Folder 1, AWRT archives, LAB.

interesting dinner table companion for her family.”<sup>355</sup> Social activities, such as receptions and fashion shows, were always an important element at the group’s early gatherings. These were usually sponsored by companies with particular interest in the women’s audience, like grocery manufacturers and department stores.

By 1947, however, an evolution was evident. The national conference agenda for this year still included sessions on connecting with the female audience and hints on broadcast technique, but there was increasing emphasis on the business side of radio and the emerging opportunities in the developing field of television.<sup>356</sup> The conference theme for the next year, 1948, was “The Woman Broadcaster in Public Affairs.” The agenda included a heavier news focus and workshop sessions with the NAB’s research arm on the demographics of the radio audience. This meeting also marked a critical turning point for the organization.

Dorothy Lewis announced to the group that she was stepping down. Several months earlier, the NAB had decided to close its New York office which had been Lewis’ base of operation. At the time, the NAB board cited budgetary reasons. They had also closed the Los Angeles office. But among the AWB membership there was a “great deal of consternation.” Ruth Crane Schaefer recalled that some believed the NAB had “purposely moved the office in order to force her (Lewis’) resignation.”<sup>357</sup> After Lewis’ departure, no one was assigned to assume her duties as coordinator of listener activity. Many years later, Lewis interpreted this as a sign that NAB priorities had changed. “There were a few on the National Board of NAB who feared

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<sup>355</sup> Judith Waller, *Radio: The Fifth Estate* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1946): 149-150.

<sup>356</sup> The women were encouraged to consider roles as TV performers “because a pretty face is appealing,” and in TV sales because of their “buoyant enthusiasm.” *Broadcasting*, 10 March, 1947, 26, 54.

<sup>357</sup> Crane, AWR oral history collection, 8, LAB.

that I was building a Frankenstein!”<sup>358</sup> NAB officials assured the women of their ongoing commitment to the group, and in fact, suggested a meeting to discuss a more formal integration of AWB within the NAB. Numerous accounts in the trade press emphasized the parent organization’s position that the action was aimed at achieving “closer cooperation” which could result in giving the women a “stronger and more constant” voice in industry councils. NAB Executive Vice-President Jess Willard said “AWB will not be a step-child.”<sup>359</sup>

A few months later, the suggested meeting occurred, and by the end of the year a plan was in place to organize the women’s group as a full-fledged department of the NAB. Both boards gave it “overwhelming” approval, and once again, the trade press touted the new arrangement as “strengthening” women’s place in industry affairs.<sup>360</sup> Yet, the appearance of an elevated status may have been deceiving. The women’s director now reported directly to the NAB president, but the group’s work on behalf of women broadcasters was still subject to the approval of NAB management. By this time, some members were beginning to chafe under the stringent control. Pat Griffith Mower who took over as AWB director following Dorothy Lewis’ departure, recalls the first rumblings about becoming “an entirely separate and independent” organization.<sup>361</sup>

Those rumblings grew louder in the summer of 1949 when the NAB announced internal streamlining which included staff reductions, and the total

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<sup>358</sup> Dorothy Lewis letter to Douglas Guimary, 27 January, 1971, cited in Guimary, 32.

<sup>359</sup> See *Broadcasting*, 9 February, 1948, 37; *Radio Daily* 2 February, 1948, 1, 6; *Billboard*, 7 February, 1948, 8.

<sup>360</sup> *Broadcasting*, 7 March, 1949, 34.

<sup>361</sup> Interview with Pat Griffith Mower and Ruth Crane Schaefer by Bill Schaefer, 7 January, 1976, American Women in Radio and Television Oral History Project, 9, AT1048, LAB.

elimination of the travel allowance for the director of the AWB.<sup>362</sup> There were many unanswered questions about how an independent group would be able to function without the financial support of the NAB, but the ladies “auxiliary” now seemed ready to cast off its subservient role. Mower sensed a gendered sign of the times: “The winds that later blew in Women’s lib were growing stronger and the AWB Executive Committee, together with representatives of the National Association of Broadcasters, mutually agreed that a separation would be best for all concerned.”<sup>363</sup> For eight years, the men and women had functioned in relative harmony, but indeed the times had changed. AWB members could hardly be considered activists, yet they now seemed less willing to accept their deferential role. As for the men, they no longer had to deal with Dorothy Lewis, but they had grown increasingly uncomfortable with “early feminist politics.”<sup>364</sup> It was time to disengage.

The path going forward was now clear: at its conference in Cleveland in the spring of 1950, AWB members voted to form an independent organization with the formal separation to be effective at the beginning of the next year. The NAB framed the break in the most favorable terms, describing it as “a starting point for a much enlarged organization, both from the standpoint of increased membership and a broadened scope of operation.”<sup>365</sup> NAB provided modest funding, just over \$3,000, along with office space, equipment and access to the NAB’s legal, research and promotion resources for a three-month period while the group transitioned to its newly independent status.

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<sup>362</sup> *Broadcasting*, 8 August, 1949, 25, 48.

<sup>363</sup> Mower, AWRT oral history project, 12, AT1048, LAB.

<sup>364</sup> Sonya Forte Duhe, “American Women in Radio and Television,” in *Women’s Press Organizations, 1881-1999*, ed. Elizabeth Burt, (Westport, CT: Greenwood Press, 2000), 3.

<sup>365</sup> *The Beam*, Vol. 10, No. 1, January, 1951, 1. Box 22 Folder 3, AWRT archives, LAB.

Edythe Meserand was the designated WOR representative at that Cleveland meeting in 1950 where the women took a first step toward the formation of the new and independent organization for women in broadcasting. Given what is known of the group's early focus, and its member roster which had consisted largely of women's directors and women's program hosts, it becomes easier to explain at least a portion of Meserand's hesitation to be actively involved in the group. More complicated is an understanding of the apparent shift in her thinking. Before that took place, she played the role of reluctant participant one more time.

Following the convention vote to separate the two organizations, the NAB called a group of women to Washington to discuss formation of the new group. Margaret Cuthbert, with whom Meserand had worked at NBC, was put in charge of the nominating committee. It was her job to select the core group to handle the many tasks involved in the start-up and she recommended that Meserand be the chair of the organizing convention. Cuthbert had known Meserand for more than twenty years and had seen the young and inexperienced teenaged press aide at NBC grow to become an executive at one of the most powerful radio stations in the country. To be hand-picked by her mentor for the role would seem to be an honor, but initially, Meserand balked. Many years later, she recalled the phone call from Cuthbert who said "we are going to have this convention and you're going to be the convention chairman."<sup>366</sup> Meserand initially refused, but, ultimately, she agreed because "You never say no to Margaret Cuthbert."

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<sup>366</sup> Meserand, WPCF, 42.



### Planning for a New, Independent Women's Group

And so the openly reluctant convention planner began her work.

*Broadcasting* took note of Meserand's appointment as convention chair in an article which also described plans for a national membership campaign to be launched at the local level and to be led by former AWB regional directors.<sup>367</sup> The objectives of the new group at this early stage were virtually identical to those of its predecessor, as were the categories and requirements for membership, with two important distinctions: First, active members would now pay annual dues to help fill the gap left by the loss of the NAB subsidy. Second, and more broadly important, the new group, an independent organization, was no longer bound by the requirement that its members be employed at NAB stations. This was an issue that had frustrated a number of women and may have added to the push for independent status since there were well over a thousand radio stations which did not belong to the NAB.

Work began on a constitution and by-laws, along with a code of ethics. The convention site and date were set: Hotel Astor, New York City, April 6-8, 1951. The organizers began their outreach, using the AWB membership roster as a starting point. Now, however, they could look beyond NAB-member stations to a new universe of women not previously eligible for membership. It is impossible to determine just how large that number was, but available data from Federal Communications Commission and NAB documents show it was substantial.<sup>368</sup>

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<sup>367</sup> See *Broadcasting*, 22 January, 1951, 40.

<sup>368</sup> As of June 30, 1951, there were 2,782 licensed radio stations in the United States. 17<sup>th</sup> Annual Report of the Federal Communications Commission. [http://transition.fcc.gov/ftp/Bureaus/Mass\\_Media/Databases/documents\\_collection/annual\\_reports/1951.pdf](http://transition.fcc.gov/ftp/Bureaus/Mass_Media/Databases/documents_collection/annual_reports/1951.pdf) Accessed February 9, 2014. As of November 30, 1951, 1,455 U-S radio stations were NAB members. NAB Member Services Newsletter, December 10, 1941. Data courtesy Michael Henry, LAB.

Meserand assigned specific chores to members of her convention committee. One woman was given responsibility for the registration process; another was tasked with overseeing publicity for the gathering. There was a prize coordinator, a director for entertainment and another for hospitality. The highlight of the conference would be the evening sessions where prominent speakers would appear, and panel discussions would take place. To handle this important responsibility, Meserand assigned two long-time colleagues and AWB veterans, Henriette Harrison, National Radio and TV Director for the YMCA and Dorothy Lewis, who had led the AWB and was now radio coordinator at the United Nations.<sup>369</sup>

As the convention approached, the trade press provided frequent updates on plans for the gathering. *Radio Television Daily* heralded the impressive array of speakers, which included Frieda B. Hennock, the first woman to serve on the Federal Communications Commission, Edward Barrett, the assistant secretary of state, Vijaya Lakshmi Pandid, India's ambassador to the United States, and Jack Gould, the well-known and influential radio editor of the *New York Times*.<sup>370</sup> The prominent and popular New York broadcaster Mary Margaret McBride, a long time and active member of the original women's group, was named to moderate a panel discussion "How Can We Make World Affairs our Listeners' Affair," which featured women broadcasters from Cuba, France, Canada, the Trans-Pacific News Service and the Voice of America.<sup>371</sup> *Radio Television Daily* published a preliminary schedule a few days before the convention was convened. Along with the impressive array of

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<sup>369</sup> Official program, American Women in Radio and Television organizing convention, Box 9 Folder 1, EMP. LAB.

<sup>370</sup> *Radio Television Daily*, 2 April, 1951, 1.

<sup>371</sup> Official program for the AWRT organizing convention.

speakers, and a visit and tour of the then-new United Nations Building and the U.S. Delegation Headquarters, the schedule was laden with business sessions; this was, after all, the organizing conference for a brand new group.

But, in addition to the procedural necessities and the heavy emphasis in convention sessions on women's role in international affairs, there was ample time to socialize at meals and cocktail parties which were underwritten by corporate friends of radio and TV broadcasting. This was a fairly common practice during the period and had been a regular feature of regional and national gatherings of the AWB. For the inaugural gathering of AWRT, a wide range of groups hosted or sponsored receptions, meals or events, such as fashion shows. Hosts included the National Association of Greeting Card Publishers, the American Gas Association, Bendix Home Appliance Company, the Grocery Manufacturers of America, The Better Shoe Guild, the New York Dress Institute, the Millinery Stabilization Committee, and *McCall's Magazine*.<sup>372</sup> Women were the primary consumers for the products these companies produced. Most were regular advertisers on women's radio programs.

The advance registration of roughly 200 represented an encouraging start for the new group. Yet, in fact, the actual attendance topped 280, which meant last-minute logistical changes such as these: Larger meeting rooms were needed; additional meals had to be ordered, and more buses to transport delegates around town had to be secured. It fell largely to Edythe Meserand to insure that things ran smoothly and available accounts indicate, they did. In three back-to-back editions, front page stories in *Radio-Television Daily* heralded the "well-integrated" launch of the new group, and described the event as a "milestone" for women in broadcasting.

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<sup>372</sup> Ibid.

*Variety* characterized the convention as a moment of transformation, in which the women moved from being a “dormant” group to becoming an “incipient force” in the industry.<sup>373</sup>

In addition to the many favorable stories in the broadcasting trade press, there were dozens of letters and telegrams written to Meserand later, praising her work as a “superb” conference organizer and wishing her well as she took the reigns of AWRT. They came from radio station colleagues around the country, from network executives, broadcasting trade associations, and from business and industry groups who had frequent contact with women broadcasters.<sup>374</sup> One letter of particular interest was written, not to Meserand, but to Ted Streibert, WOR’s vice-president and general manager. Dorothy Lewis, who had played such an important, albeit divisive, role in the earlier women’s broadcast group described Meserand’s handling of the convention as “efficiency itself ... under a poised and charming exterior. No detail was too small to consider ... she had courage in dealing with personalities.”<sup>375</sup>

After two and a half long days of speeches, workshops, panel discussions and socializing, there was just one agenda item on the conventions’s final day, Sunday, April 8, 1951. It was a business meeting, at which the remaining items of procedural importance, including the election of officers, would take place. On the first ballot,

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<sup>373</sup> See *Radio-Television Daily*, 6 April, 1951, 1, 8; 9 April, 1951, 1, 6; 10 April, 1951, 1, 5; *Variety*, 11 April, 1951, 23.

<sup>374</sup> Among the groups and organizations represented: National Association of Broadcasters, Department of Agriculture, National Association of Manufacturers, Easter Seals Society, Catholic Charities of New York, Westinghouse, Grocery Manufacturers Association.

<sup>375</sup> Dorothy Lewis to Theodore Streibert, LTR, 24 April, 1951. This and the many other letters regarding the AWRT organizing convention and Meserand’s election as the group’s first president are all located in Box 8 Folder 10, EMP. LAB.

Edythe Meserand received 124 of the 150 votes cast, becoming the first president of the new organization, American Women in Radio and Television.<sup>376</sup>

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<sup>376</sup> AWRP ballot for officers/directors from the organizing convention with hand-written vote tallies. Box 9 Folder 1, EMP. LAB.

## Chapter 7: The Early Years of AWRT and Edythe Meserand's Post-Broadcasting Life

“A pioneer organization of women in the great American system of free broadcasting”<sup>377</sup>



FIGURE 9 AWRT's First Officers

Edythe Meserand (center) and other newly elected officers at the group's organizing conference in New York City in April, 1951. Doris Corwith of NBC is on the left, Edythe Fern Melrose of WXYZ, Detroit is on the right. Photo used with permission: Edythe Meserand Papers, Library of American Broadcasting, University of Maryland. Box 8 Folder 16.

<sup>377</sup> Part 1, Code of Ethics and Standards of Practices, American Women in Radio and Television. Approved at the group's organizing convention in April, 1951 and published as a supplement to the first newsletter, August, 1951. Box 8 Folder 18, EMP. LAB.

American Women in Radio and Television began its journey as a self-described “pioneer.” The label seems entirely fitting, since the group was carving an independent path into an unknown future. The funds provided by the NAB to help the group through its transition were exhausted in a few months time; temporary office space and facilities support were gone ... in many respects, AWRT was starting from scratch. “When I took office,” Edythe Meserand recalled many years later, “I had only the constitution and bylaws in one hand, and an outdated AWB membership list in the other. We had no money, files, office, stationary, staff, equipment – nothing but an enthusiastic and courageous Board of Directors.”<sup>378</sup>

Meserand wasted no time. Just two weeks after the organizing convention she called her board of directors back to New York for a meeting. The structure of the 11-member executive board reflected the group’s ambition to represent women from across the country, and from a wide range of fields with interest in the broadcasting industry. There were four vice-presidents: Doris Corwith, supervisor of talks and religious programs at NBC from the east, Edythe Fern Melrose of WXYZ in Detroit from the central region, Marjorie Christopher of WQAM in Miami from the south, and Izetta Jewel of KCBQ, San Diego from the west. The fifth elected officer, Dorothy Fuller from WBET in Brockton, Massachusetts, was the group’s secretary-treasurer. The remaining five board members were directors-at-large, chosen to represent industries and agencies allied with broadcasting: Harriet Sabine of the Can Manufacturers’ Institute was the representative for trade associations; the commercial group was represented by Betty Stuart Smith of the J. Walter Thompson advertising agency in New York. Elizabeth Marshall of WBEZ in Chicago was the

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<sup>378</sup> Edythe Meserand to Martha Pell Stanville, LTR, 30 March, 1981, Box 1 Folder 2, EMP. LAB.

representative for educational broadcasting interests. Service organizations were represented by Natalie Flatow, the radio and television director for the Girl Scouts of America. Filling the final executive board spot, a representative for government agencies with interests in women's broadcasting: Gertrude Broderick worked at the Federal Security Agency, part of the Office of Education in Washington, D.C.<sup>379</sup>

The women had a very full agenda at the initial meeting. The necessary paperwork to formalize AWRT incorporation was signed, a counsel was named, an executive director was hired, state chairmen (yes, they were chairMEN) and standing committees were appointed. The large task of establishing and growing a viable independent organization to support and serve the professional community of women in broadcasting had begun.

On May 5<sup>th</sup>, 1951, almost exactly one month after its founding, the group opened its national headquarters in a small office in Grand Central Terminal in New York. Meserand claimed she paid the first two months rent out of her own pocket, and while this could not be verified, it seems conceivable since the group did not yet have a regular source of income.<sup>380</sup> Furniture and supplies for the new office were “begged for, borrowed or stolen.”<sup>381</sup>

In the early going, this may fairly be described as a “shoestring” operation. Before a regular revenue stream could be established, the group relied heavily on the support of Edythe Meserand's employer, WOR Radio. “They paid for so much ... more than they realized, I think,” she recalled, “all the mailings, and all the time and

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<sup>379</sup> “AWRT Meet: Edythe Meserand is Elected First Head of Group,” *Broadcasting*, 16 April, 1951; “Woman Broadcasters Elect: Set radio-TV Code,” *Radio Television Daily*, 10 April, 1951.

<sup>380</sup> Meserand to Martha Pell Stanville, LTR, 30 March, 1981, in advance of the group's 30<sup>th</sup> annual convention. Box 22 Folder 2, AWRT archive, LAB.

<sup>381</sup> Meserand to Esther Van Wagoner Tufty, LTR, 27 October, 1960. Box 9 Folder 7, EMP. LAB.



travel I had to devote to my duties as president.”<sup>382</sup> The group also benefited from the support of long-time AWB “sponsor,” the Greeting Card Association which donated a “bright and shining new mimeograph machine.”<sup>383</sup>

With a national headquarters, officers, state chairmen and committee members in place, the immediate task at hand was clear: grow the group. At its launch, AWRT had 358 members, barely one-quarter of the peak membership of the now-defunct AWB and a modest starting point for the campaign to extend membership beyond the NAB station universe. There were literally hundreds of radio stations in the United States which were not NAB members; this presented a formidable challenge, but also a great opportunity.<sup>384</sup> In an interview conducted several months after the group’s formation, Meserand set a high membership goal, estimating that the number of women eligible for membership in the new group could be as high as five-thousand.<sup>385</sup> Of course, this included women directly employed in radio, and now the burgeoning television industry but she was also counting women in the allied fields of advertising, public relations, in broadcast-related trade associations and within government. The Board of Directors set a more modest, but still ambitious goal of one thousand members by the end of 1951.<sup>386</sup>

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<sup>382</sup> Meserand remarks to conference of the Capital District Chapter of AWRT, 1 October, 1976, Saratoga Springs, NY. Box 10 Folder 1, EMP. LAB.

<sup>383</sup> First AWRT newsletter, as yet unnamed, August, 1951, 1, Box 8 Folder 18, EMP. LAB.

<sup>384</sup> Available figures from Federal Communications Commission and NAB documents indicate there were more than 1,300 radio stations operating in the United States in 1951 which were not NAB members.

<sup>385</sup> Interview with Izetta Jewel, conducted in February, 1952 in connection with the first New York State convention of AWRT.

<sup>386</sup> “News and Views,” AWRT newsletter, August, 1951, 7. Box 8 Folder 18, EMP. LAB.

*Building an Organization from the Ground Up*

As a broadcast executive, Meserand was clearly in the minority among AWRT's first members. By her estimate, only about ten per cent, just 30 of the more than 280 who registered for the organizing conference were "top executives" in the industry.<sup>387</sup> That short list included some of the best known women managers in early radio: Margaret Cuthbert, Doris Corwith, Agnes Law, Helen Sioussat, and Geraldine Zorbaugh. But the composition of the group Meserand now led looked a good deal like that of its predecessor. Most of those on the initial AWRT roster were women's directors or women's program hosts working at radio stations and networks in the same gender-defined positions women had occupied for years. Among this group, Meserand said, the ones who were considered the "most important" were in the "glamour jobs" ... they were "the broadcasters, the women who worked on the air."<sup>388</sup> Over time, this would change as more women began to move outside the traditional "women's" place and into positions of greater responsibility. The task for Meserand was to look beyond her immediate cohort of female executives to the much larger group of eligible women, working on the air and behind the scenes at non-NAB member stations.

As the outreach to that larger universe of women in broadcasting got underway, it is instructive to consider the evolution of the women's program on radio and, by now, increasingly, on television. At the time of AWRT's founding, the focus for these broadcasts was still women's life inside the home. But over time, the mandate was more broadly defined: no longer strictly limited to domestic life, health,

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<sup>387</sup> Meserand to Ann Rogers, LTR, 2 May 1991, Box 1 Folder 5, EMP. LAB.

<sup>388</sup> Ibid.

family and fashion, these programs increasingly sought to reach and serve the growing numbers of women who were now actively interested in the larger world, outside the home. The war and the wage-earning experience had widened the lens of women's perspective; women's radio programming adapted to reflect this.

Meserand frequently addressed this in her early speeches as AWRT president, when she reminded women to take their responsibilities as public communicators seriously, and to recognize the potential influence they could have on listeners. "We have much to do as women in our chosen profession. We have an obligation to those we come in contact with ... to be well informed"<sup>389</sup>

This trend toward a more broadly defined genre of women's programs emerged during the war years and continued into the early 1950s, as women were invited to look beyond their immediate family responsibilities to the larger world outside. In an article spotlighting the newly constituted women's group, pioneering broadcaster Lisa Sergio described the progressive changes as moving women beyond the kitchen and into the realm of national, even world affairs. Said Sergio, "by their voice in radio or their presence on the TV screen, (women) had the power to influence and perhaps even direct the thinking of millions of mothers, wives, sisters and sweethearts at another crucial point in the nation's history."<sup>390</sup> Sergio spoke with considerable authority on the subject, as a well-known and highly regarded radio news commentator.

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<sup>389</sup> Meserand speech to New York state AWRT meeting, Nov. 17, 1951. Similar remarks delivered to a Michigan state meeting, January 18, 1952. Box 8 Folder 19, EMP. LAB.

<sup>390</sup> Lisa Sergio, "The Voice in Your Kitchen," *Talent*, a publication of the International Platform Association, Vol. XVIII, no. 2 (Spring, 1951), 26-27, Box 1 Folder 12, EMP. LAB.

The women's directors and program hosts understood these expanded responsibilities and took their obligations seriously. Consider the language used in the group's standards of operation and its code of ethics ... the guidelines adopted by the group to steer its mission as an organization of broadcasting professionals.<sup>391</sup>

“To serve our country, and our communities, individually and collectively ... through the medium in which we work”

“To report the news with painstaking accuracy...”

“To make certain that sources of information are reliable and that all worthy phases of community life are served equitably”

“To make certain the time period entrusted to me is the most productive possible...”

“To do everything in my power to make my program and my participation in it an integral part of the civic and social life of my community, a dynamic force for good...”<sup>392</sup>

The women were prepared, indeed eager to take on a larger role within the broadcast industry, actively seeking greater recognition for their contributions. But in the early going, the women appeared to follow the example of their president, Edythe Meserand, framing themselves and their organization in the most lady-like ways. The term “feminist activist” did not apply.

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<sup>391</sup> AWRP Code of Ethics and Standards of Practices adopted at the organizing convention in April, 1951 and published as a supplement to the group's first newsletter, Vol. 1, No. 1, August 1951, 3, Box 8 Folder 18, EMP. LAB.

<sup>392</sup> The AWRP code was entirely in keeping with the philosophy of the NAB. The language was similar, and in some cases, the same as that used in the NAB's Standards of Practice, also known as the Broadcaster's Creed, published in the *Broadcasting* yearbook for 1951. Accessed online. [http://www.americanradiohistory.com/Broadcasting\\_Yearbook\\_Summary\\_of\\_Editions\\_Page.htm](http://www.americanradiohistory.com/Broadcasting_Yearbook_Summary_of_Editions_Page.htm)

Leadership to Build “A Firm Foundation”



FIGURE 10 Edythe Meserand publicity photo.

This picture was used in early AWRT materials, including the official program for the organizing convention, which took place in April 1951. Box 2 Folder 1. EMP. LAB. Photo used with permission.

Immediately after her election as the first AWRT president, Meserand received many letters of congratulations. She was described as “the perfect choice,” and praised for showing a great “talent for leadership” which would give the newly formed group “an ideal start.”<sup>393</sup> The strong administrative skills she had demonstrated throughout her broadcasting career had been on display when she

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<sup>393</sup>Gertrude G. Broderick to Edythe Meserand, LTR, 9 April, 1951, Box 8 Folder 10; Doris Corwith to Meserand, LTR, 11 April, 1952, Box 1 Folder 3; Alma Kitchell to Meserand, LTR, n.d. April, 1951, Box 8 Folder 11; Helen Livingston to Meserand, LTR, 9 April, 1951, Box 8 Folder 10. EMP. LAB.

guided the organizing convention for the new group. They would serve her well, once again, as she steered AWRT on its inaugural course.

The basic framework for the new organization was put into place with a well-defined leadership structure, operating guidelines, standards of practice, and a code of ethics. Meserand's role in the early going, as she frequently described it, was to create a "firm and stable foundation" on which to build an organization that would serve the women and the industry in which they worked.<sup>394</sup> To this end, she travelled frequently during her year in office, appearing at state and local chapter meetings and conferences, representing the group at industry functions, and generally taking every available opportunity to speak on behalf of women in broadcasting. Whenever and wherever she spoke, Meserand took on the role of cheerleader and career guide.

The central themes within her message remained consistent, reflecting her view of what was required to succeed/make it in a man's world. She urged the women to take their obligations as professional communicators seriously, "By virtue of our work, we are able to instill thoughts and ideas in those who listen or see us. Let us be certain of our facts before we voice them."<sup>395</sup> She advised the women to reach beyond expectations that others might impose. "Forget labels and categories and think of yourself not as a woman, but as a person who is equal to the situation or position you find yourself in."<sup>396</sup> She challenged the women to become equal contributors on the job. "Don't live in the shadow of the old bugaboo that 'a woman

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<sup>394</sup> See Meserand speech to New York state chapter, 17 November, 1951; speech to Michigan state chapter meeting; 18 January, 1952, Box 8 Folder 19; Meserand letter to Esther Van Wagoner Tufty, recalling the group's first 10 years, 27 October, 1960, Box 9 Folder 7, EMP. LAB.

<sup>395</sup> Meserand speech to New York state chapter meeting, 17 November, 1951, Box 8 Folder 19, EMP. LAB.

<sup>396</sup> Meserand speech to New York chapter conference, 9 February, 1952, Box 8 Folder 19, EMP. LAB.

hasn't a chance in a man's world." But she warned, "We cannot trust for acceptance, we must work for it, and work hard."<sup>397</sup> Recognition for women, she advised, "does not come easy and when it comes, requires double the effort to maintain."<sup>398</sup>

Over the course of its first year, as new state and local chapters were formed and the membership roster grew, AWRP and Edythe Meserand attracted increasing media attention. Activities of the group, such as workshops and seminars, were regularly tracked in trade publications, such as *Radio-Television Daily*, *Broadcasting* and *Variety*, but also in the local press in cities with an AWRP chapter. During her travels around the country Meserand frequently touted the group's rising industry profile. "Station managers," she said, "became interested in our efforts ... leaders of industry recognized AWRP."<sup>399</sup>

The group's growing visibility had also begun to attract attention outside of broadcasting. In June 1951, just two months after it was formed, AWRP was selected by the National Association of Manufacturers (NAM) to participate in the "It's Your Business" program, broadcast nationally on ABC. The show featured leaders of the nation's major women's organizations interviewing NAM officials on a broad range of issues of public concern.<sup>400</sup> Pioneering broadcaster Pauline Frederick was chosen to represent AWRP. Her selection, rather than Meserand, would not be surprising given Frederick's status as one of the most visible women broadcasters in the country at the time.

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<sup>397</sup> Meserand speech, 17 November, 1951, Box 8 Folder 19, EMP. LAB.

<sup>398</sup> Meserand speech, 9 February, 1952, Box 8 Folder 19, EMP. LAB.

<sup>399</sup> Meserand speeches delivered to various local, state, and national AWRP gatherings, including New York state chapter meeting, 17 November, 1951; Michigan state meeting, 18 January, 1952, first annual New York state conference, 9 February, 1952; AWRP National Conference in Detroit, 4 April, 1952; New York city chapter meeting, 21 April, 1952. Box 8, Folder 19, EMP. LAB.

<sup>400</sup> First AWRP Newsletter, Vol. 1, No. 1, 7. Box 8 Folder 18, EMP. LAB.; AWRP "First Year Firsts," AWRP archives, Box 22 Folder 2, LAB.

Two months later, in August 1951, the group received another boost when the popular woman's magazine *McCall's* established the Golden Mike Awards, the first to recognize the contributions of women in radio and television, both on and off the air. The magazine chose the AWRT convention as the site at which the annual awards would be presented.<sup>401</sup> From a marketing perspective, this seemed a brilliant move on the part of *McCall's*. The AWRT roster was filled with women broadcasters whose programs were a regular fixture in millions of American homes. As for the potential benefit to AWRT, this endorsement should not be underestimated. During this period, in the early 1950s, the magazine was a cultural touchstone, depicting and helping to define what it meant to be an American woman. The significance of the close relationship which developed between the magazine and women broadcasters held special meaning for Edythe Meserand. As noted previously, she was one of seven women selected as the first recipients of the Golden Mike award. Meserand was honored for creating and managing the WOR Christmas Children's Fund which distributed clothing and gifts to sick and needy children throughout the New York metropolitan area.

As the group's visibility grew, so too did the membership roster, although at a somewhat plodding pace. From the time she took office in April 1951 through the end of the year, Meserand launched an extensive membership drive. She wrote at least half a dozen letters to the group's officers and board members seeking their support in the effort to expand the member base. In June she sent letters to each of the regional vice-presidents in which she provided the names of state chapter chairs and lists of stations in each territory where potential new members might be found.

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<sup>401</sup> Ibid.



In her next mailing, written in July, Meserand enclosed membership applications with each letter, along with the request that each woman sign up two new AWRT members before the end of the year.

A few months later, in early October, after expressing concern that membership numbers were “lagging,” Meserand offered additional assistance in organizing new local chapters and specifically in reaching out to prospective members and supporters. She enclosed sample meeting agendas, draft versions of letters to member prospects, and suggestions for personal appeals to station managers seeking their backing for the group. Because the support of these executives would be critical to AWRT’s success, Meserand carried out her own direct-by-mail appeal to the managers “from coast to coast,” in which she emphasized the value of member access to a nationwide idea exchange, and the importance of additional contact and closer working relationships with women in “allied fields.”<sup>402</sup> In what may have been an attempt to provide competitive incentive, one of the letters to her board also included a map of the United States showing the membership numbers for each state.<sup>403</sup>

On December 27, 1951, Meserand sent a letter to “take stock at the end of a year of high hopes for what we were going to accomplish.”<sup>404</sup> At this point, AWRT had just over 600 members which must have been a clear disappointment to

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<sup>402</sup> The reference to “allied fields” refers to those working in advertising, public relations, corporate and government communications.

<sup>403</sup> Meserand letters to the AWRT board and to radio station managers were written on numerous dates in the first several months of her term, including 10 April, 23 April, 7 June, 20 June, 9 July, 19 October, 1951. Box 8 Folder 13, EMP. LAB.

<sup>404</sup> The broadly defined goals, in addition to expanding the membership of the group, were the same as those outlined in the founding documents: to provide a medium of exchange for ideas, to encourage greater cooperation among women in broadcasting and allied fields, and to increase women’s opportunities “in service to the broadcasting industry.” AWRT Constitution, published as a supplement to the group’s first newsletter, August, 1951, Box 8 Folder 18, 4. EMP. LAB.

Meserand and her officers who had expected to capitalize on the much larger pool of women who were now eligible to join the group. Not only were membership levels well below their ambitious goal of one thousand members by the end of the year, they were less than half the size of the AWB at the time it was dissolved. There is no clear explanation for this, although it seems reasonable to suggest that the men who were the station managers no longer saw the need to support the women's organization since it now operated as an independent group, entirely separate from the NAB. Whatever the reasons for the fairly modest membership tally, Meserand looked forward to 1952 as a time to "consolidate our gains" and develop new projects and services with "renewed vigor."<sup>405</sup>

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<sup>405</sup> Membership numbers are taken from monthly tallies included in the AWRT newsletter, *News and Views*. Box 8 Folder 18, EMP. LAB. End of year letter to AWRT officers and board is dated 27 December, 1951. Box 8 Folder 13, EMP.

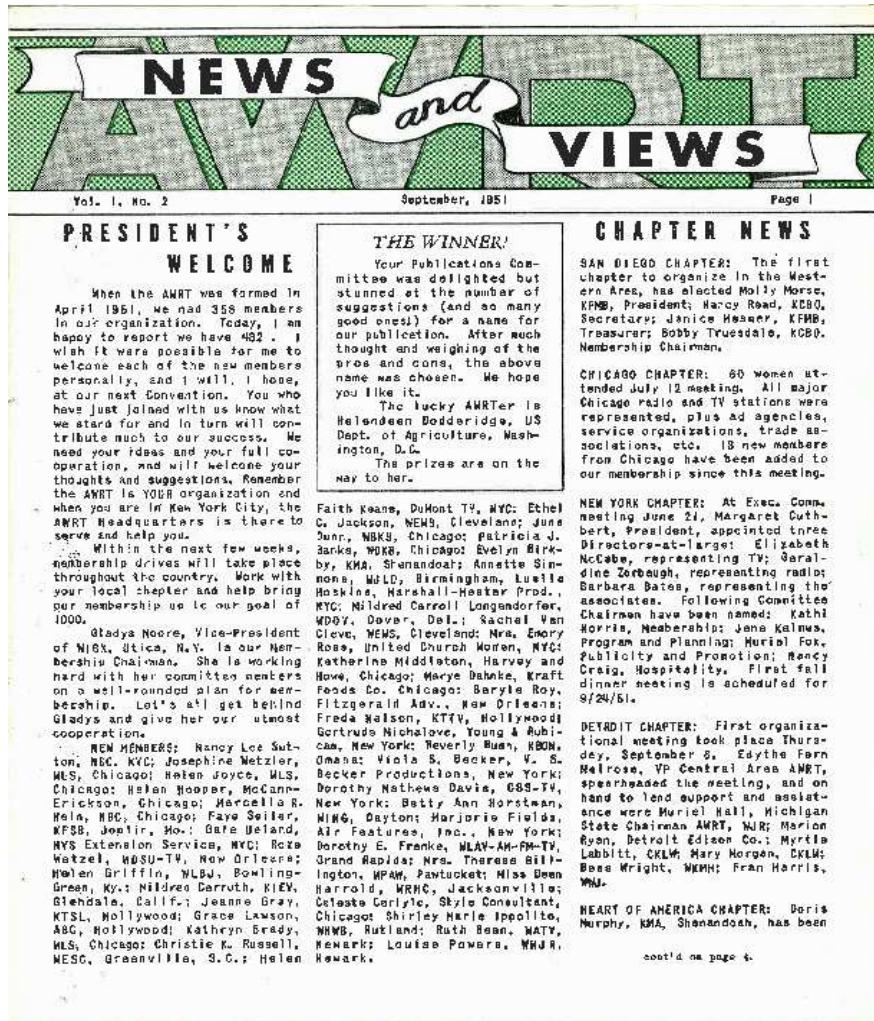


FIGURE 11 AWRT Newsletter

This is the second edition of the monthly AWRT newsletter, but the first to be published under the name “News and Views” in September 1951. A greeting from Edythe Meserand appears on the first page. Box 8 Folder 18. Edythe Meserand Papers. Library of American Broadcasting. Image used with permission.

“What AWRT Can Do for You”

Publication of a monthly newsletter was one way to fulfill a key objective of the group ... to provide a “medium of exchange” to share information and ideas. The first edition, published in August 1951, but not yet named, featured a lengthy profile of newly elected president, Edythe Meserand. The newsletter described itself as a

publication “for women, by women, about women, to help all women.”<sup>406</sup> It included a pledge to show a “friendly interest” in the lives of members and to keep them up to date on the activities of the group and developments in the industry.<sup>407</sup> A review of available issues indicates this pledge was generally fulfilled. The newsletter, which was soon named “*News and Views*,” included monthly updates on membership numbers, and regular features on work being done by AWRP chapters. A “President’s Welcome” column was published in September 1951. Meserand’s activities and travels on behalf of the group appeared routinely; in December, her appearance at a New York state chapter meeting was noted, as was an account of her February 1952 visit to Detroit for a meeting of the group’s executive board. Members could see the evidence of Meserand’s work, from the small act of appointing new state chairmen, to the headline-worthy announcement of her Golden Mike Award.

Articles offering programming ideas and professional support were occasionally published under the heading “What AWRP Can Do for You.” These helpful professional tips covered a variety of subjects, ranging from sales and marketing advice to lists of program topics and guest suggestions. The publication also reflected Meserand’s oft-stated belief in women’s obligations to use their influence in service to their communities and their country. Patriotic and public service-oriented campaigns were a newsletter fixture; the November 1951 issue included an appeal from the government’s Office of Price Stabilization for women’s assistance in educating the public about inflation. The following month, the U-S

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<sup>406</sup> First AWRP Newsletter, Vol. 1, No. 1, 2. Box 8 Folder 18, EMP. LAB.

<sup>407</sup> Ibid.

military took a turn, asking women broadcasters to become partners in the effort to address military manpower problems.<sup>408</sup>

Halfway through its first year, “*News and Views*” published preliminary results of a survey conducted by the NARTB which provided an accounting of jobs in broadcasting, including those in the still young television industry.<sup>409</sup> The picture painted by the survey is instructive in highlighting the mixed circumstances facing women who were working in the field in October 1951. The survey found that “television and radio offer more in the way of professional opportunities for women than do a great majority of industries.”<sup>410</sup> This would seem to support Edythe Meserand’s belief that women had much to contribute, particularly if they were willing to work hard, as she had done. Notwithstanding this generally optimistic view, the survey also pointed to the limitations still placed on women’s roles, citing few prospects for jobs as engineers, producers, directors or managers. The best opportunities for women, according to the survey, could be found in women’s and children’s programs. “The ‘kitchen canary,’ has become a fixture in television, just as it has, for years, been an accepted part of radio.”<sup>411</sup>

The times were changing, but this was clearly an evolving process. The tinge of gender-appropriate roles in broadcasting remained. There is a certain irony, then, that the woman chosen to lead this professional women’s broadcast group into the brave new world did not position herself as part of this gendered tradition. Edythe

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<sup>408</sup> All available issues of “*News & Views*” which were published in 1951 and 1952 were reviewed. Box 8 Folder 18, EMP. LAB.

<sup>409</sup> The NARTB, National Association of Radio and Television Broadcasters, was the new name for the NAB, changed in early 1951 to reflect the growth in the television industry.

<sup>410</sup> No other industries are mentioned.

<sup>411</sup> *News and Views*, Vol. 1, No. 3, October, 1951, 4. Box 8 Folder 18, EMP. LAB. The ‘kitchen canary’ is presumably an attempted humorous reference to female hosts whose programs still included the traditional women’s fare of household hints, cookery and family life.

Meserand had, indeed, occupied positions that were considered “women’s” roles. However, in her accounts of life in broadcasting, she defined her career track in very different terms, choosing to emphasize her move into the overwhelmingly male-dominated realm of news and public affairs. There is no direct evidence that Meserand took a dim view of women’s programming. Clearly, she recognized that women’s directors and program hosts were her core constituency. Nevertheless, the carefully crafted depictions of her career trajectory seem to suggest she made every effort to define her professional life in another way.

#### *Assessing AWRT’s Inaugural Year*

To evaluate Edythe Meserand’s leadership of AWRT during the group’s inaugural year, it is appropriate to examine the progress made in meeting the group’s stated objectives “to provide a medium of exchange of ideas...to encourage greater cooperation among women...to increase women’s opportunities to be of service...”.<sup>412</sup> These broadly stated goals were virtually the same as those of its predecessor, the AWB. Now, however, the women were operating on their own playing field, and in a greatly expanded universe of broadcasting stations.

Regarding the first objective, providing a venue for interaction and sharing, there seems little doubt the group was able to create a framework which allowed this to occur on a regular basis. Recall that these women, even those who were previously connected by membership in the AWB, had only occasional opportunity for contact, and when they did get together, these meetings occurred under the auspices, and the

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<sup>412</sup> AWRT Constitution, Article I, Section 2, published as a supplement to the group’s first newsletter, August, 1951, Box 8 Folder 18, 4. EMP. LAB.

watchful eye, of the parent group, the NAB. Under the newly independent structure, the women met at an annual conference, but there were now many new occasions. State, regional and local meetings were now taking place where the women could share ideas, learn new techniques and strategies for their programs, and enjoy the friendship and support of their colleagues. Practical career advice would seem an appropriate centerpiece for this group of professional women and it was a regular focus for Edythe Meserand. But in all of the speeches she delivered as president, her final remarks inevitably settled on something she called "...far more important."<sup>413</sup> "We could not have accomplished so much in this short year," she emphasized, "without the intangible give and take of friendship and understanding."<sup>414</sup>

An expanding network of chapters and growing member base also provided a venue in which to address another of the group's objectives: to encourage cooperation and increase opportunities for women to be of service. The work of the AWRT Projects Committee illustrated progress in meeting these goals; early in 1952, the committee organized a "good citizenship" campaign which focused on the important role to be played by women during an election year. Public service projects of this sort, which had been a hallmark of the AWB, would become even more important as the AWRT sought to channel its growing influence among women broadcasters, but also with the listening and viewing audience.

It is not surprising that Edythe Meserand consistently offered a rosy assessment of the group's trajectory in its inaugural year. In speeches and panel discussions, in comments to the trade press and during appearances before other non-

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<sup>413</sup> Meserand speech to Michigan state AWRT meeting, 18 January, 1952, Box 8 Folder 18, EMP. LAB.

<sup>414</sup> Meserand speech to New York AWRT meeting, 21 April, 1952, Box 8 Folder 18, EMP. LAB.



broadcast organizations, she enthusiastically and repeatedly touted the accomplishments achieved during her tenure. In her final speech as president, delivered to the group's national convention in Detroit in April 1952, Meserand recounted each small step in the first-year organizing process, then went on to praise the "interest and enthusiasm" that brought recognition to AWRT:

"Today our membership extends to each of our states and territories ... and we haven't scratched the surface! Our potential is great – there are thousands of women who are preparing to make radio and television their careers...we have set a high standard for ourselves in practice, code and membership and the success of AWRT depends on it."<sup>415</sup>

Recognition and stature, both within and outside the broadcast industry were, in Meserand's view, keys to the group's success. The public picture she presented inevitably described AWRT as "well respected" and "widely recognized."<sup>416</sup> Viewed only through the prism of this perspective it would appear the first year was trouble free. There is, however, some evidence to suggest otherwise. As the end of her term approached, Meserand received letters of gratitude for her service to the group. Most of the correspondence made only oblique references to the "challenges" and the "difficulties" of the first year, instead, praising Meserand's "courage" in taking on unspecified "crushing" responsibilities and handling them all with "tact and grace."<sup>417</sup> One writer expressed extreme "unhappiness at the emphasis on the educational radio

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<sup>415</sup> Meserand speech to AWRT convention, 4 April, 1952, Detroit. Box 8 Folder 19. EMP. 8,

<sup>416</sup> Mentioned in numerous speeches including remarks to the New York state conference, 9 February, 1952; National Convention, 4 April, 1952; New York City chapter meeting, 21 April, 1952. Box 8 Folder 18, EMP. LAB.

<sup>417</sup> Gertrude Grover to Meserand, 6 February, 1952, LTR, Box 8 Folder 11; Mary Morgan to Meserand, 9 April, 1952, LTR, Box 8 Folder 11, EMP. LAB.



angle.”<sup>418</sup> Presumably, this referred to the inevitable conflict between radio’s dual missions ... to produce programs that make money and at the same time inform and enlighten the listeners.

Looking back, ten years after her term as president had ended, Meserand seemed ready to offer a more critical assessment of the challenges she faced while guiding a new and inexperienced group. “Some of the problems,” she recalled, “seemed insurmountable.”<sup>419</sup> She offered no detail on those problems, but credited the AWRT board members with “hard and diligent” work in guiding the organization through its first year.

The rosy public picture presented by Meserand extended to her depiction of the group’s inner workings. She described “no conflict, no pettiness and no pressure-group tactics” during the formative year.<sup>420</sup> However, just a few weeks after her final speech as president, she spoke to the New York chapter of AWRT, describing “dissent and a feeling of unrest” at the Detroit convention regarding proposed changes to the group’s constitution.<sup>421</sup> Meserand’s remarks contained only vague reference to the presumed source of the “unrest.” What she did discuss were the “difficult and complex” challenges facing the Eligibility Committee.<sup>422</sup> A copy of the recommendations reveals an effort to tighten eligibility standards, by limiting membership to women “employed on a regular basis” or “employed full-time” in

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<sup>418</sup> Morgan to Meserand, 9 April, 1952. EMP. LAB.

<sup>419</sup> “AWRT, Ten Years Ago,” written in response to a request from Esther Van Wagoner Tufty to commemorate the group’s 10<sup>th</sup> anniversary, 6 October, 1960, Box 9 Folder 7, EMP. LAB.

<sup>420</sup> Meserand speech to AWRT convention, 4 April, 1952, Detroit. Box 8 Folder 19, EMP. LAB

<sup>421</sup> Meserand speech to AWRT New York chapter meeting, 21 April, 1952, Box 8 Folder 18, EMP. LAB.

<sup>422</sup> Ibid.

broadcasting and associated fields.<sup>423</sup> The proposal was voted on and approved during the first business meeting of the Detroit convention.

But after hearing from the group's legal counsel and parliamentarian that "delegates may have voted on something they did not want," Meserand and the executive board put the proposal back on the agenda for the convention's final business session.<sup>424</sup> A new vote was taken; the earlier vote to approve tighter eligibility language was rescinded, and further action was postponed until a later date. Because of her background and professional experience in broadcasting, it seems reasonable to assume that Meserand would have supported the more stringent membership requirements, although this is not clear based on the text of her remarks. Whatever the case, it is worth noting that membership issues, particularly as they pertain to qualifications and categories of membership have long been a source of friction within professional organizations, and between professional groups.<sup>425</sup> The membership issue was supposed to be an agenda item on the next year's conference schedule, however organizational records show that at the last minute, it was removed. It appears AWRT did not take up the matter again until the late 1950s.<sup>426</sup>

As the end of her term approached, several colleagues asked Meserand to run again. After she turned them down, Gertrude Grover wrote a letter, pleading with her

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<sup>423</sup> Proposed changes to the AWRT Constitution and by-laws, to be voted on at the AWRT convention in Detroit, April, 1952. Box 9 Folder 2, EMP. LAB.

<sup>424</sup> Meserand speech to AWRT New York Chapter meeting, 21 April, 1952, Box 8 Folder 18, EMP. LAB.

<sup>425</sup> One example involved the Women's National Press Club and the Newspaper Women's Club. Beginning in the 1930's these two groups competed for members among Washington women reporters, but with differing professional requirements and distinct categories of membership. The Newspaper Women's Club had a special associate member category for women who were not journalists, but served as sources for women's and society news. The group also established an honorary member category for women either famous in their own right or as the wives of prominent men.

<sup>426</sup> Information was collected from several issues of "News and Views," Box 8 Folder 18 EMP, LAB.

to “reconsider.” Grover said at least “two others from the nominating committee and other key members” shared the view that the group would benefit from another year of Meserand’s leadership.<sup>427</sup> There is nothing to suggest that Meserand ever considered a second term, nor is there any available explanation as to why she chose not to run. It is conceivable that her expanded duties at WOR may have been a factor. Yet, her willingness to remain actively involved with AWRT would seem to suggest that probably was not the case.

Following her formal farewell to the group at the 1952 Detroit convention, Meserand received many letters of thanks and praise for her work during the group’s inaugural year. Harold Fellows, President of the NARTB hailed her “good judgment and guidance,” which set a pattern for all who follow.<sup>428</sup> AWRT board member Izetta Jewell praised Meserand’s “splendid leadership.”<sup>429</sup> Another letter mentioned her “untiring efforts,” and “keen enthusiasm.”<sup>430</sup> But perhaps the most meaningful comments came in a series of letters from her former colleague and long-time mentor, Margaret Cuthbert. She expressed her deep pride in the work Meserand had done, and called her work “dignified and authoritative.” Cuthbert concluded, “You have been an excellent president, and my hat is off to you.”<sup>431</sup>

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<sup>427</sup> Gertrude Grover to Edythe Meserand, 6 February, 1952 LTR, Box 8 Folder 11, EMP. LAB.

<sup>428</sup> Harold Fellows to Edythe Meserand, 3 April, 1952, Box 8 Folder 11, EMP. LAB.

<sup>429</sup> Izetta Jewel to Edythe Meserand, 26 April, 1952, LTR, Box 8 Folder 11, EMP. LAB.

<sup>430</sup> Rachael Reed to Edythe Meserand, 8 April 8, 1952, LTR, Box 8, Folder 11, EMP. LAB.

<sup>431</sup> Margaret Cuthbert to Edythe Meserand, 14 April, 1952, 23 April, 1952, and 29 May, 1952, LTR, Box 8 Folder 11, EMP. LAB.

### *The End of a Career in Daily Broadcasting*

When her term as AWRT President ended, Edythe Meserand seemed busier than ever in her professional life, having taken on additional responsibilities as the producer of at least two weekly programs for WOR-TV. Based on her own recollections, which are supported in published accounts of her activities, she was actively engaged in her chosen profession and had gained confidence as an advocate for professional women. But there were unsettling developments in the workplace that no doubt proved troubling to Meserand. A few months before her AWRT term ended, in January 1952, the ownership of WOR Radio and Television changed hands. Moving quickly to quash rumors of a shakeup, the new owners, General Tire & Rubber, praised station managers and insisted that “home rule” would remain in place.<sup>432</sup> Meserand recalled a top executive of the company calling the station employees together, offering the reassuring words: “Don’t worry. Nothing is going to change.”<sup>433</sup> But over the next several months staff cutbacks occurred on a regular basis. One article in the trade press identified as many as 25 people who would be released as a result of consolidation.<sup>434</sup> Another described additional cutbacks as a “severe curtailment of non-executive personnel.”<sup>435</sup> By late September, the new ownership had taken another step which would mark the end of the line for Edythe Meserand’s commercial broadcasting career:

“General revision of WOR-TV New York’s program schedule and an accompanying reduction in personnel are in progress in an

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<sup>432</sup> *Broadcasting*, 21 January, 1951, 25, 38.

<sup>433</sup> Meserand is quoting Thomas O’Neil, WPCF oral history, 44.

<sup>434</sup> *Broadcasting*, 16 June, 1952, 14.

<sup>435</sup> *Broadcasting*, 13 October, 1952, 30.

attempt to put the station, which has been suffering “enormous losses,” on a money-making or at least break-even operation, an executive of General Teleradio, station owner, said last week ... Concurrently it was learned that Dave Driscoll, for more than 15 years WOR’s news head and for the past few months of WOR-TV only, will leave the station at the end of this week, together with his assistant, Edythe Messerand, special events director of WOR-TV...<sup>436</sup>

Staff consolidation, whether forced or through voluntary departures, was not an unusual business practice within the broadcasting industry in the wake of an ownership change, but Edythe Meserand seemed entirely unprepared. Years later, she described the events in dramatic and likely overstated terms. In spite of evidence to the contrary, she claimed that all WOR employees had been fired, “everybody from (station manager) Ted Streibert right down to the page boys.”<sup>437</sup> Meserand was in Atlanta, making preliminary arrangements for the next AWRT convention, when she learned of the “disaster” in a phone call from her boss, Dave Driscoll. “It nearly killed me,” she later explained.<sup>438</sup> “The disappointment was so dreadful ... this was my life, 24 hours a day, for 15 years,” and she continued, “It was a very traumatic experience ... I felt betrayed.”<sup>439</sup>

At this point, just a month shy of her forty-fourth birthday, Edythe Meserand had been working in broadcasting for more than a quarter century. She had both survived and fallen victim to corporate shifts and management changes and so it is somewhat surprising that the WOR realignment would have come as such a shock.

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<sup>436</sup> *Broadcasting*, 29 September, 1952, 27.

<sup>437</sup> Meserand, *Broadcast Pioneers*, 101. Streibert was given a different position within the newly reorganized company, but he resigned less than a month after Driscoll and Meserand left WOR. *Broadcasting*, 13 October, 1952, 30.

<sup>438</sup> Messerand, *WPCF*, 44.

<sup>439</sup> Meserand, *BP*, 101.

In fact, reports of a possible sale or merger of the company had been circulating for nearly a year. Nevertheless the “traumatic” experience left her reeling, and in the immediate aftermath, she wanted nothing to do with the broadcasting industry.<sup>440</sup> Indeed, she would never return to full-time broadcasting work. Her boss, Dave Driscoll, eventually did, although many months would pass before he rejoined the daily broadcasting ranks. Driscoll was hired as Director of News and Public Affairs at WCBS Radio in New York just over a year after leaving WOR.<sup>441</sup>

There is very little information available to provide insight into Meserand’s next professional pursuits. One might presume that she eventually would have explored other opportunities in radio or television. She had years of experience, she was well known, and seemingly well regarded in the field. In one interview, she hinted there had been other opportunities. “A couple of things were offered,” she said, but she provided no details other than to repeat that she “wanted no part of broadcasting.”<sup>442</sup> There is no evidence to indicate that she ever sought another job in the industry. Broadcasting was in something of a transition as television, still in its infancy, was experimenting with new types of programming to reach a growing audience. Radio needed new strategies to hold listeners who had newly divided loyalties. Perhaps Meserand’s self-described trauma and the sense of betrayal left her sufficiently embittered, so that her next move seemed unusual, at the very least. In addition to the work she continued with AWRT, Meserand opened a shop on the Upper East Side of Manhattan, which specialized in personalized gifts. News of “The

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<sup>440</sup> Meserand, BP, 101. She describes the circumstances of her departure from WOR in various interviews including RYL 1691, WOR Collection, interview by Marianne Macy, 2/24/81, Library of Congress and WPCF interview by Fern Ingersoll.

<sup>441</sup> *Broadcasting*, 11 November, 1943, 74.

<sup>442</sup> Meserand, WOR collection. Library of Congress RYL 1691.

Little Shop” opening appeared in the broadcast trade press.<sup>443</sup> In her oral histories, she spoke only briefly of what seems to have been a fairly short-lived endeavor. It appears the shop was open for about two years. The timing and the circumstances which led Meserand to the next chapter in her life are not clear. Perhaps her brief foray into retail was unsuccessful or not to her liking; the death of her mother in 1954 may have pushed her toward a break with the past. Whatever the reasons, what followed was a move out of Manhattan, to a remote, rural setting in upstate New York.

### *Starting a New Life*

With her friend, Jane Barton, the woman who would be her companion for the rest of her life, Edythe Meserand moved to Windy Hill Farm in Esperance, New York. A deed of sale shows the two women took ownership of the farm in January, 1956.<sup>444</sup> Friends and family members say Meserand knew the former NBC executive who was selling the property and had actually visited the farm during her days in broadcasting.<sup>445</sup> Initially, the two women intended to use the farm strictly as a weekend or summer retreat, but the plan changed. “I just loved the country,” Meserand recalled, “It was an experience I wanted.”<sup>446</sup>

The tranquil, remote setting, dozens of acres in the foothills of the Adirondacks, was a stark contrast to the fast-paced urban environment from which

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<sup>443</sup> *Broadcasting*, 27 July, 1953, 103.

<sup>444</sup> Document provided by Karen Hazzard, neighbor and friend to Meserand and executrix of Jane Barton’s estate.

<sup>445</sup> Karen Hazzard telephone conversation with author, 15 February, 2014. Ellen Huber Fields telephone conversation with author, 19 February, 2014.

<sup>446</sup> Judy Patrick, “Radio Pioneer Reflects on Glory Days,” *The Sunday Gazette*, 10 March, 1996, G1-2.

she had come. Friends describe Windy Hill as a magnificent setting, but say at the time the two women bought the farm, it was “in rack and ruin.”<sup>447</sup> Now Meserand, who had embraced new challenges throughout her career, had landed in the midst of a new one: a 150-year-old-house, badly in need of renovation. She says she had imagined her new life would allow time to focus on “writing the great American novel,” but the restoration took priority.<sup>448</sup>

Based on the available accounts, it appears this project fell largely to Meserand. Barton had established a successful career in media relations with the New York State Department of Commerce in Albany, forty miles and about an hour’s drive away. Like Meserand, Barton had a long and varied career in the media and related industries. She had occasionally worked as a journalist, but was probably better known for her work doing publicity and promotion for radio and theater personalities. She had a distinguished career during World War II as a commissioned officer in the WAVES, and served as a reserve officer until 1968. But when her active duty ended, Barton resumed her media pursuits, initially working again as an entertainment publicist, then beginning in 1948, as a Program Director in the state bureau of Radio, TV and Motion Pictures. It is conceivable the two met as early as 1937 when Barton worked briefly as a writer for *Radio Guide*, one of the popular fan magazines of the time. At that point, Meserand had been working for more than a decade in New York radio. It seems more likely the two met through their involvement with AWRT or its predecessor organization. This probably occurred in

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<sup>447</sup> Hazzard telephone conversation, 15 February, 2014.

<sup>448</sup> Meserand, BP, 105.



the late 1940s or early 1950s, marking the beginning of a decades-long relationship between the two.

The nature of that relationship does not figure in any account of Meserand's life. Just as she had avoided detailed descriptions of her birth and upbringing, Meserand did not talk about her personal life as an adult. The one exception was her brief account of the would-be fiancé she left waiting at the marina on Labor Day weekend in 1939. Even in this story, however, the emphasis was not on the end of a personal relationship, but rather on her career direction that was about to change.

Some insight into Meserand's domestic life is provided by family members and friends. A great-niece says Meserand "loved men" and became engaged to a jewelry designer at some point after the move to upstate New York.<sup>449</sup> "He was a regular visitor to Windy Hill on weekends and holidays," she recalled, but the engagement ended when he died.<sup>450</sup> As for the relationship between Meserand and Barton, her niece said "they were never openly romantic ... as far as the family was concerned this was a very close friendship." That may also have been the view of close neighbors and friends including Karen Hazzard who said "The nature of the relationship was never an issue ... it simply didn't occur."<sup>451</sup> Hazzard did acknowledge, however, that in the mid-1950s, some of the residents of this largely conservative, rural area might have looked on the women's co-habitation as an unorthodox living arrangement. If Meserand was ever worried about this, she never revealed those concerns. Again her niece recalled, "In most ways (my aunt) was unafraid and unashamed about how she lived her life, but on this topic, she never said

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<sup>449</sup> Author conversation with Ellen Huber Fields.

<sup>450</sup> Ibid.

<sup>451</sup> Author conversation with Karen Hazzard, 12 March, 2014.

a thing.”<sup>452</sup> In the absence of any additional information, we are left to conclude, at the very least, that it was a relationship that worked for both women over many years.

What we can determine, based on the available information is how much the two women had in common: both were ambitious and career-driven; they had worked for years in the media industry, spending considerable time with entertainers and celebrities of all sorts; each had lived a fast-paced New York City life. Less obvious, but perhaps more interesting ... both women had taken steps to distance themselves from their ethnic heritage. We know Meserand dropped her Italian family name, although we do not know when this occurred. Barton was born to Jewish parents Abraham and Matilda Greenberg in 1918. Her legal name change to Barton is believed to have taken place sometime in the summer or early fall of 1939.<sup>453</sup>

Notwithstanding the common ground, it is also possible to identify obvious differences between the two women. Edythe was the elder of the two ... ten years older than Jane. Meserand was a high school graduate. Barton had earned a bachelor’s degree in journalism and went on to receive a master’s degree in Public Administration. Based on the accounts of friends and family members, the two had very different personalities: a great-niece describes Meserand as “purposeful, but also gracious, loving and inviting.” Barton, she says, was “tough, stern, and more reserved.”<sup>454</sup>

Meserand busied herself with the restoration project for an unspecified period of time. Not long after arriving at Windy Hill, the two planted hundreds of trees as

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<sup>452</sup> Author conversation with Ellen Huber Fields.

<sup>453</sup> Jane Barton papers, Schlesinger Library on the History of Women in America. Accessed via portal, <http://discovery.lib.harvard.edu/> on February 17, 2014.

<sup>454</sup> Author conversation with Ellen Huber Fields.

part of a soil conservation and reforestation project. In 1960, they began selling limited numbers of the evergreens, and within a few years, the project, which was not intended to be a business, had become a successful and profitable tree farm. The surprising transformation of these two city-bred, career women into part-time farmers was well known in the immediate area, but it also attracted the attention of the *New York Times*. Charlotte Curtis, who may have been a professional acquaintance of one or both women, told the story of their new lives after she visited the farm in late 1962.<sup>455</sup> Based on Meserand's recollections and conversations with several of her friends, the unexpected venture continued operation well into the 1970s.

### *In the Media Business, Again*

Beyond the home restoration and tree farm activity, the timeline for Edythe Meserand's work life after her move to the farm is not easily documented, although it is clear she was not yet ready to abandon a career, or her professional pursuits. In oral history recollections which make no reference to a specific time, Meserand says she simply "got itchy ... I just couldn't play house anymore," she explained.<sup>456</sup> Her next move took her back into the familiar territory of the media: she opened up her own business, Edythe J. Meserand Advertising, Promotion and Public Relations. Her niece Ellen believes this happened almost immediately after the move to Windy Hill. "She didn't give herself much time to relax."<sup>457</sup> In the 1962 *New York Times* article,

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<sup>455</sup> Charlotte Curtis, "Selecting a Christmas tree is a Do-It-Yourself Project." *New York Times*, 27 November, 1962, 42.

<sup>456</sup> Meserand, BP, 106.

<sup>457</sup> Author conversation with Ellen Huber Fields.

Meserand is identified as a “public relations consultant in Albany.”<sup>458</sup> Local newspaper profiles described some of her work “producing radio and TV commercials for area businesses.”<sup>459</sup>

The move into advertising and PR would not have been an unusual direction to take. Meserand’s final years of work in broadcasting had focused on news and public affairs, but she had spent considerable time in publicity and marketing roles which would have prepared her for this new type of work. Meserand offered few accounts of this period. She apparently worked alone, and handled a limited number of accounts.<sup>460</sup> Despite her previous experience and a long list of industry connections in New York City, this new venture focused on businesses and issues of concern to the upstate New York region that she now called home. “She didn’t flaunt her prior experience,” one of her new neighbors recalled, “She needed to fit into this rural community and she did.”<sup>461</sup>

A few more details of this chapter in Meserand’s professional life emerged from conversations with others who were close to her during this period. They recall that many of Meserand’s clients, like Jack’s Restaurant, were businesses in Albany, the state capital which was about an hour’s drive away.<sup>462</sup> Other clients included small local establishments such as Eastman Cheese in Esperance, and the well-known upstate New York winemaker, Taylor Wines.<sup>463</sup> Her great-niece, who visited the

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<sup>458</sup> Curtis, 27 November, 1962.

<sup>459</sup> Irene Gardner Keeney, “50-Year Veteran Remembers Radio,” *Albany Knickerbocker/Schenectady Union Star*, 9 November, 1976. 4-D. Jean Tompkins, “Edythe Meserand Takes a Bow, but Doesn’t Put on ‘Airs’,” *Mohawk Sun*, 28 September, 1976, 6-7.

<sup>460</sup> Meserand, BP, 106.

<sup>461</sup> Author conversation with Karen Hazzard.

<sup>462</sup> Author conversation with Lynda Marino, February 14, 2014.

<sup>463</sup> Author conversations with Lynda Marino, Karen Hazzard, Ellen Huber Fields.

farm regularly, recalled helping her aunt with occasional direct mail campaigns. “I would stuff envelopes, then walk down to put them in the mailbox,” she explained.<sup>464</sup>

The recollections that Meserand shared from this period generally focused on her work with one notable client: a woman who made history in New York state politics. In 1968, Mary Anne Krupsak made her first run for public office. Her campaign for the state assembly included the old fashioned, door-to-door visits that may seem quaintly curious in contemporary politics. Before she knocked on the door at Windy Hill Farm, Krupsak says she had been told by others that Edythe and Jane were “knowledgeable about media,” which may help explain why that initial encounter, over hot chocolate in Edythe’s kitchen, “went on for more than two hours.”<sup>465</sup> Inevitably, the conversation about Krupsak’s campaign turned to her party affiliation. She was a Democrat and recalled Edythe proudly declaring that she was a Republican. For the aspiring candidate, this was not an obstacle. “I knew I would need Republican support if I was going to win,” she said.<sup>466</sup> Years later, Meserand remembered the party label as far less important than the person. “Although we are of different parties ... Mary Anne was a very honest and bright gal, and I believed in the kind of government that she was talking about.”<sup>467</sup>

Meserand’s work with Krupsak on that first campaign marked the beginning of an extended professional relationship, through another race for the assembly, one for the state senate, and finally, a successful run for Lieutenant Governor in 1974.<sup>468</sup>

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<sup>464</sup> Author conversation with Ellen Huber Fields.

<sup>465</sup> Mary Anne Krupsak telephone conversation with the author, 16 December, 2011.

<sup>466</sup> Ibid.

<sup>467</sup> Meserand, BP, 102.

<sup>468</sup> Krupsak was the first woman elected to state-wide office in New York.

The friendship between the two women continued for many years; Krupsak was the featured speaker for an event honoring Meserand's 50-year media career in 1976.<sup>469</sup> She was also among those eulogizing Meserand at her memorial service on June 5, 1997.

### *Maintaining the AWRT Connection through Changing Times*

Based on her own accounts, Meserand limited her advertising agency activity, which left ample time to maintain a close connection with AWRT. She still travelled frequently to meetings and conferences. She put her organizational skills to good use for many more years after her term as the group's president, serving as national convention "liaison" in 1953, as convention director a year later, and as the business manager for the group's annual conference in 1959. She was regularly recruited to serve on national committees and convention panels, and was honored at the group's annual convention in 1976 for her decades-long career and her years of service to the group. She became very active in the Capital District chapter in upstate New York, serving two terms as its president.<sup>470</sup> In 1976, the same year the national group had recognized Meserand, her "home" chapter celebrated her 50-year career at a big gala on the opening night of their convention. A few hundred guests attended the reception and dinner, including many from Meserand's broadcasting days. Pauline Frederick served as the emcee for the evening which featured remarks from friends, colleagues and business associates. In between the speeches, congratulatory

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<sup>469</sup> In October, 1976, the Capital District Chapter of AWRT honored Meserand at a gala dinner event in Saratoga Springs, New York.

<sup>470</sup> Meserand served as president of the Capital District AWRT from 1955-58 and again from 1963-65.

telegrams were read which had come from some of the industry's most recognizable and influential figures, including Leonard Goldenson, the founder and first chairman of ABC, and Julian Goodman, who had recently retired as the president of NBC.

In 1986, the Capital District AWRT chapter created the "Edythe Meserand Distinguished Broadcaster" award, presented to women who "exemplify the goals of the national organization."

"To advance the impact of women in the electronic media and allied fields, to represent women in the industry, to act as a resource for members and the industry, to improve the quality of electronic media and to address community concerns."<sup>471</sup>

The list of the awards' recipients is a roster of some of the best known and widely respected women in broadcasting and includes Barbara Walters, Carole Simpson, Sally Jessy Raphael, Faith Daniels and Linda Ellerbee.<sup>472</sup>

In its first three decades, the AWRT roster moved on a consistently upward path. At the five year mark, the group had more than 1300 members in thirty-two chapters around the country; by its tenth anniversary in 1961, membership numbers reached 1600 and the chapter list had grown to thirty-eight. Women actively at work in broadcasting still formed the core of the group, and with few exceptions, served as the organization's elected leaders. Industry representatives and government officials dominated conference program schedules which featured workshops and panel discussions aimed at keeping the women informed of the latest industry developments. In general, AWRT's interests stayed well within the conservative

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<sup>471</sup> Box 9 Folder 8, EMP. LAB.

<sup>472</sup> Box 11 Folder 3, EMP. LAB.

broadcasting and media industry mainstream. However, the trajectory of the group in the middle decades of the twentieth century reflected a small but noticeable shift.

In the mid-1950s, more programming adjustments in both radio and television were taking place. Changes in the traditional homemaking shows, first evident on radio in the immediate post-war period were now taking hold on television, as well. The interests of women listeners and viewers were no longer limited to life at home and programming aimed at this critical audience needed to reflect this. For the women hosts and directors who still formed the core of AWRT, these were “anxious years.”<sup>473</sup> In her profile of the group, Sonya Forte Duhe says this shift in focus stood to benefit women who were prepared to embrace a wider programming mandate. At the same time, however, it could also mean that many women who made their careers as broadcast homemakers would be displaced. It appeared the “women’s role” in broadcasting was, once again, being redefined, but in this “anxious” time, the total number of women employed in the industry was actually on the rise. A 1958 AWRT survey, “Woman Power in Radio-Television Stations and Networks,” found that women now made up nearly a quarter of the broadcasting workforce.<sup>474</sup> Women were pushing at the edges of their largely restricted space ... their “separate sphere.” They could now envision moving further into the mainstream of broadcasting and could look to Edythe Meserand’s career as an example and an inspiration.

In the same period, another shift for AWRT was taking place that may be considered a sign of the times. The group began to take on an advocacy role, speaking out from time to time on legislative and policy issues. Most were

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<sup>473</sup> Duhe in Burt, 5.

<sup>474</sup> “Back to Our Beginnings,” *Impact: Magazine of the American Women in Radio and Television*, 1977, 5, cited in Duhe, 5.



specifically related to the broadcasting industry and government regulatory concerns. However, at some point in the early 1960s, the group appeared to assume a role as an advocate for professional women. There is little evidence providing any detail, but in the group's newsletters and organizational profiles, AWRT claims to have been active in supporting a range of women-specific legislative issues, beginning with the Equal pay act of 1963.<sup>475</sup> There is no indication the women took a position on some other important legislative action of the period, most notably the Civil Rights Act of 1964.

But by the early 1970s, we can find that gender equity issues were on the minds of AWRT members. Delegates to the 1971 national convention heard Washington attorney Marguerite Rawalt urge support for the Equal Rights Amendment. On the eve of the convention, outgoing President Virginia Pate proudly declared that women in broadcasting had always stood for individual rights for women, including equal opportunity and equal pay.<sup>476</sup>

By this time, Meserand was still involved with the group, although her advertising and public relations work may have limited her available time. As we have discovered, Meserand's views on equal pay and gender equity issues had never been a favored topic in her public appearances, but changing times seem to have affected her willingness to speak out. In a speech given just a month before the 1971 convention, Meserand acknowledged her own challenges, and the gendered disparities in the broadcasting workplace. Speaking of her time in the WOR

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<sup>475</sup> Other legislative initiatives the group claims to have supported included the 1974 women's educational equity act, the 1976 day care act, and the 1978 pregnancy disability act. Information reviewed included newsletters and convention programs. AWRT archives, Boxes 12-14, LAB, and the group's website <http://allwomeninmedia.org/>, accessed on various dates in 2013-14.

<sup>476</sup> *Broadcasting*, 3 May, 1971. 41.

newsroom, she said “It wasn’t easy and the men didn’t make it any easier for me.” Meserand continued, “Certainly I recognize sex discrimination ... I realize too that women in key positions are paid less than men.”<sup>477</sup>

For a woman who had spent her professional life defying or ignoring gender labels, this seemed a striking statement and it is the only public comment from her that addressed these issues directly. Certainly, changing times may have played a role in Meserand’s views, but at this point, the mellowing that comes with age may also have contributed. The place that Edythe Meserand had crafted for herself and now occupied was that of the elder stateswoman and mentor, whose determination and perseverance could provide career inspiration.

### *Meserand’s Final Career Move*

It is not clear how actively Meserand pursued her advertising career following her work on the Krupsak campaigns, which ended in 1974.<sup>478</sup> The next clear marker comes in 1978, when she founded the town of Charleston Historical Society. She had spent years doing research and writing scripts for the radio and television programs she produced. Now, Meserand found a new venue for those skills, scouring public records and interviewing local residents as she pieced together the story of this small, rural town.

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<sup>477</sup> Meserand speech to Zonta & Business and Professional Women, 24 March, 1971. Meserand papers, Box 10 Folder 1.

<sup>478</sup>Published accounts, including an article from the 28 September, 1990 edition of the *Schenectady Daily Gazette*, indicate she ran her advertising agency until 1985.

She became the town's first historian and was instrumental in securing a spot in the National Register of Historic Places for the small Baptist church which became the Historical Society's home. The church which was built in the late 1700s had been partially destroyed by fire, rebuilt, but ultimately abandoned by a shrinking congregation in the mid-1950s. In the cemetery adjoining the church, weeds had overtaken the headstones of Revolutionary War heroes. Reclamation of this cemetery and many other small family and community plots in the area also became a part of Meserand's new mission. She recruited local Boy Scout troops to help with the clean-up efforts. "She was very interested in preserving the history of the area," her niece Ellen recalled.<sup>479</sup>

In recognition for her efforts to preserve the history and heritage of the region, Meserand received numerous honors from state and local government officials, including citations and proclamations from the New York Governor, members of Congress, New York state senate and assembly members, county supervisors and local mayors. In addition, she was awarded the Medal of Honor from the National Society of the Daughters of the American Revolution, the highest recognition the group gives to a non-member. In 1990, she was named Woman of the Year by the Amsterdam-Mohawk Valley Business and Professional Women for "outstanding achievements and life-long contributions to the broadcast industry and to her community."<sup>480</sup>

In the last years of Edythe Meserand's life, health issues forced the usually active and engaged woman to slow down. Arthritis made it difficult for her to move

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<sup>479</sup> Author conversation with Ellen Huber Fields.

<sup>480</sup> Meserand's awards and honors are located in various locations in her collected papers. Box 8 Folders 4-9, Box 11 Folders 3-4, Box 13, Box 14. EMP. LAB.

around. She began to use a wheelchair. She developed chronic lung issues, almost certainly the result of her many years of heavy smoking. Breathing difficulty and congestive heart failure made her reliant on oxygen. Meserand's friend, Fred LeBrun, recalled "...a fairly rapid decline in her later years, and she would always say 'Don't be too long between visits,'"”<sup>481</sup>

Edythe Meserand died on June 2, 1997. She was 88. A celebration of her life was held in the same small church she had worked so hard to preserve.<sup>482</sup> Hundreds of mourners came to pay their respects. Many were her friends and neighbors from the area, but the gathering also drew local and state officials, former clients, including Mary Anne Krupsak, and former colleagues from her days with AWRT. She was remembered as a beloved local historian, a broadcasting pioneer, and a woman who cared deeply about making a difference in people's lives.

Her friend, Karen Hazzard recalled Edythe as “strongly interested in reinforcing women's self-worth, providing encouragement and guidance to be actively engaged in a society which didn't always welcome women's contributions.”<sup>483</sup> Jane Barton, Meserand's companion during the final decades of her life, shared her brief epitaph on the memorial card that was given to those who gathered to celebrate her friend's life: “Edythe was a great believer that women could contribute in any endeavor if they made the effort.”<sup>484</sup>

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<sup>481</sup> Author interview with Fred LeBrun via telephone, 9 February, 2012.

<sup>482</sup> Available records suggest this was an informal ceremony. Meserand was buried in a family plot in New Jersey, in accordance with her family's wishes.

<sup>483</sup> Author interview with Karen Hazzard, via telephone, 15 February, 2014.

<sup>484</sup> Jane Barton tribute to Edythe Meserand, Charleston Historical Society archive. Shared with author by Lynda Marino, March, 2014.

Meserand was buried in a family plot in New Jersey, in accordance with her family's wishes.

## Chapter 8: Conclusions

This dissertation aims to contribute to the history of women in broadcasting by presenting a comprehensive case study of one noteworthy woman’s journey through the industry’s early decades, including her role in founding the first independent organization for women in broadcasting. It was designed to reveal the tactics she adopted, beginning in 1926, to deal with the range of opportunities and obstacles she faced. The investigation adds to our understanding of a deeply gender-divided industry, and illustrates the complicated navigation that was necessary for women who wanted to move beyond the “woman’s place.”

The important markers in Edythe Meserand’s career align with many of broadcasting’s signature moments, such as the birth of network radio and the emergence of radio news. Her professional experiences offer insight into many of the circumstances facing women who entered the field. She managed to survive four firings; she endured gender bias and discrimination, and when she was forced out of daily broadcasting, she crafted a new career path in advertising and public relations.

As the first president of American Women in Radio and Television, Edythe Meserand secured a place in the national spotlight as she led the fledgling group on its quest to be an advocate for women’s professional aspirations. She maintained this important connection long after her term expired, continuing to give motivational speeches encouraging women to succeed in the field she had left.

Meserand was not a feminist; she adopted the male values of hard work and individual achievement. When she looked back on her career many years later, she acknowledged the gendered obstacles she had faced, but never endorsed action to eliminate these barriers for other women.

Women were key players in radio from the beginning, performing in a wide range of roles, both on and off the air. However, accounts of those who operated behind the scenes, as Meserand did, have rarely been told. With a few prominent exceptions, most of these women worked in gender-segregated obscurity, their contributions largely hidden because they lacked status and power. This research illuminates a corner of early radio's history by reconsidering the strategies and professional life of one notable figure who contributed to the development of radio news and became an influential advocate for women in broadcasting.

### *Constructing a Career and Confronting Gender Issues*

Edythe Meserand was an opportunist. From the 17-year-old girl whose chance encounter led to a job with the newly formed NBC network, to the 42-year-old woman who took the reigns of a new and untested organization, she was a risk taker who tried to adapt to whatever circumstance she faced. Throughout her career, Meserand encountered gender barriers, sometimes ignoring them or refusing to acknowledge their existence; at other times working through them, in an effort to fit in, by demonstrating she could handle whatever came her way.

Beginning with her first broadcasting job at NBC, the inexperienced teenager quickly demonstrated ambition, and an uncanny ability to capitalize on timing and

circumstance. She was willing to “cover” for her immediate supervisor whose work schedule occasionally suffered because of his after-work activities. Meserand’s ghost-writing subterfuge was discovered. She was scolded, but wound up with a promotion in the growing NBC press department.

This work put Meserand in regular contact with many of radio’s early stars and the influential columnists who reported on the growing industry. At NBC, she would also meet two women widely acknowledged to be among the most important female figures in early broadcasting. Meserand nurtured the relationships she formed with Bertha Brainard and Margaret Cuthbert, and with the celebrities and reporters she worked with. Even at this early point in her career, Meserand seemed to understand the value of professional connections.

The abrupt end to Meserand’s career at NBC, when she stood up to the man in charge, provided another early lesson in workplace survival: Be prepared to deal with the consequences of men exercising their executive power. Just five years into her career, Meserand had been fired, and she would be again. Displaying flexibility and cultivating confidence in the face of setbacks would prove critical in the years ahead.

When she moved to WGBS in 1931, Meserand succeeded by adapting to the new circumstances she faced.<sup>485</sup> This meant taking on gender-specific roles as “Musical Clock Girl” and as producer of programs aimed specifically at the female audience. Meserand downplayed her work in an arena that fell squarely in the women’s separate sphere, but she capitalized on the opportunity by learning program production skills that would prove invaluable later on.

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<sup>485</sup> WGBS, owned by Gimbel Brothers Department Store was sold to William Randolph Hearst in October, 1931. The call letters were changed to WINS in 1932.



Two of the important workplace lessons Meserand had learned converged when she was fired for a second time. This dismissal, apparently the result of her rebuff to the sexual advances of the station executive who fired her, is another example of a woman without power falling victim to a man in charge. This was, she said many years later, the first time she had experienced “real discrimination.”<sup>486</sup> But on this occasion, Meserand could take advantage of some of those valuable connections she had nurtured years before, which gave her entree to the next rung on her professional ladder.

Her next job as Promotions Director at Hearst Radio was her first quasi-executive position. She had an expense account, eventually she was given a secretary, and she developed yet another set of skills in the field of publicity and marketing. Once more, Meserand advanced her career by adapting to a new environment and the changing demands of the job. She had survived two gender-tinged firings. However, this time, she would wind up in the gender cross-hairs both on the way out ... seemingly fired for not being a member of the “old boy’s club,” and on her way in to her next position.

Through each of her previous professional transitions, Meserand had to adjust her approach and adapt her skills to new job requirements, but each position had been a step up in her career. This time, she confronted personal and professional humiliation and, as she later described it, a type of overt hostility and discrimination that she had not seen before, as she was forced to accept a demotion in order to remain employed. The entry level position came with a salary less than her previous expense account; her immediate supervisor was a woman who had been her secretary years earlier. The sharpest indignity, however, came in the form of a lengthy lecture from the station manager, who

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<sup>486</sup> Meserand, WPCF oral history. 16.

told Meserand women had no chance to advance in the WOR organization. “That’s the way it is here,” she was told.<sup>487</sup>

Those cautionary words did not discourage her, and may in fact have provided additional incentive for Meserand to make the most of an unhappy and unfulfilling situation. She used creativity and her organizational skills to draw attention to her work, and at a critical juncture, during the lead-up to World War II, she was given the opportunity to move out of the press and publicity department and into the male preserve of news and public affairs. Meserand’s role in the newsroom developed gradually over a period of years, expanding in parallel with the growing demand for radio news. By this time, she had worked in many aspects of the business at both the network and station levels. She had experienced the ebb and flow of life in the corporate world, somehow managing to turn each setback into an opportunity. Now, Meserand found herself on a new playing field where the rules of the game required a different approach.

The newsroom and the newswork production process are traditionally male-centric. Women, like Meserand, who enter are “normalized” into an environment which is actually “organized around a man-as-norm and woman-as-other structure.”<sup>488</sup> When she arrived in this setting, Meserand needed a strategy to help her navigate the newsroom waters. There was no other woman with whom she could share the experience or who could serve as a guide, and so she adopted an approach which can best be described as incorporation. In order to be considered the broadcasting professional she wanted to be, Meserand accepted the gendered newsroom values and practices long established by the men in power. She demonstrated determination and dedication in her struggle to be

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<sup>487</sup> Meserand, WPCF, 19.

<sup>488</sup> Marjan DeBruin and Karen Ross, eds. *Gender and newsroom Cultures: identities at Work* (Creskill, NJ: Hampton Press, 2004) 146-47.

respected and accepted as a serious newswoman. She celebrated her position as a valued member of the team, and regularly claimed that she was treated no differently because she was a woman. She seemed to enjoy a smoke or a cocktail as much as her male colleagues.

Yet, there is evidence Meserand straddled a fine line in her professional approach, maintaining a carefully-honed feminine persona. She kept clean gloves and stockings in her desk drawer; she dressed in tailored but feminine suits and silk blouses. An ever-present charm bracelet became one of her signatures. In addition, although she never described her work in gendered terms, she may have brought a feminine touch to some of her newsroom work, by reporting and producing humanized documentaries, like her close-up view of multigenerational family life in New York City's Chinatown, a behind-the-scenes look at the work of the Red Cross, or a profile of the Women's Army Auxiliary Corps.<sup>489</sup> In doing so, Meserand displayed what Van Zoonen has called a "womanview" by demonstrating greater concern than men might have shown about the background and context of a story, bringing a more human perspective.<sup>490</sup> In this regard, it is worth recalling that one of Meserand's singular accomplishments at WOR was not a news project or program, but rather the long-running annual campaign she organized to help sick and underprivileged children at Christmas time.

Timing and circumstance played an important role in the final years of Meserand's broadcasting career. Bamberger, WOR's parent company, was among a growing number of broadcasters across the country anxious to try their hand in the new medium of television. This opened another door for Meserand. The period became one

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<sup>489</sup> Scripts for dozens of Meserand's programs are included in her personal papers. Boxes 3-8. EMP. LAB.

<sup>490</sup> Liesbet Van Zoonen. *Feminist Media Studies* (London: Sage Publications, 1994)

of her busiest and most prolific and the work in TV gave her yet another important bridge to connect her with the growing numbers of AWRT members who were beginning a journey along the same unexplored path.

More than a quarter-century of work had given Meserand an expansive view of the business. She had begun her professional life only a few years after the launch of commercial radio broadcasting. She was one of the original employees of NBC, the very first radio network, and she was among the first to venture into the untested waters of television. She was a participant in or witness to many of the most important developments in both radio and television's early years. She would also experience the tumult of change. When WOR-TV's financial condition grew increasingly bleak in 1952, the company was sold and many of the station's employees, including Meserand, were released or chose to leave on their own. *Broadcasting* magazine, which had followed developments of the corporate takeover closely for more than a year, reported in late September 1952 that Meserand and her boss, Dave Driscoll would "leave the station at the end of the week."<sup>491</sup> In her recollections, Meserand stated emphatically, that she and many others were fired.

#### *Navigating the Broadcasting Industry's Changing Waters*

In many respects, the track of Edythe Meserand's career in broadcasting parallels the evolution of the industry. She benefited from radio's early open door which welcomed eager women and men who were willing to take a chance in a brave new world. She adapted organizational and writing skills to secure a role in supporting the

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<sup>491</sup> *Broadcasting*, "WOR Economy," September 29, 1952, 27.

early radio network's most valuable commodity ... the men and women performers who were the radio stars. In the 1930s as the medium matured, program schedules became more diverse, expanding beyond the music and entertainment shows that dominated the earliest years. Meserand did not hesitate when given the opportunity to join in this new pursuit. Her early programming efforts may not have been highly produced or sophisticated by later standards, but they gave Meserand the chance to gain important skills in program production.

What we find when examining the first decade of Meserand's professional life is a willingness to try new things, and a quiet determination to withstand career setbacks. Three times she was hired to positions for which she had no particular experience. She worked hard, learned quickly, and based on available accounts, was successful in each job. Yet, on three occasions, Meserand was fired, not because she was incompetent but rather, because she was an easy target for powerful men who exercised their executive muscles.

During 15 years at WOR, Meserand had to reconsider her work strategy as she immersed herself into gendered newsroom life. Her focus was on her performance, as it always had been, but now her work would be judged against that of her male colleagues. She addressed this briefly in one of her earliest speeches as AWRT President. When asked how she managed to rise to an executive position typically occupied by men, Meserand's response reflected her carefully constructed persona. "I completely lost my identity and worked side by side with men ... and was accepted by them as an equal," she said. Her next remarks were in line with a work philosophy she shared regularly when she spoke to women's groups. "We cannot trust to luck for this acceptance; we must

work for it, and work hard.”<sup>492</sup> A few months later, at another AWRT gathering, Meserand delivered a similar message, essentially calling on women to overlook the sexism and rise above the degrading treatment they might face:

“Recognition in any field does not come easily and after it comes, it means double effort to maintain it. It means hard work and, many times, sacrifices we are not anxious to make ... enduring the leer or the sneer or the raised eyebrow ... it means being able to take the barbs and the praise with equal ease. It means being, first and always, a person equal to the situation.”<sup>493</sup>

As she approached the end of her term as AWRT president, Meserand seemed to gain confidence in her ability to deliver an inspirational message to women working in the media. She would often remind her audience of women who had achieved early success in broadcasting like her mentors Bertha Brainard and Margaret Cuthbert, and professional friends who had been early initiates in AWRT, such as Geraldine Zorbaugh, an ABC lawyer who was the group’s first counsel and pioneering broadcaster, Pauline Frederick. Other women’s career accomplishments frequently served as the vehicle for Meserand’s motivational message, in which she extolled the values of flexibility, dedication, creativity, enthusiasm and, most of all hard work. It seems apparent, however, that this was also a very public effort by Meserand to define her own professional career. It is ironic that many of these speeches were given only months before Meserand’s work at WOR, and her career in day-to-day broadcasting would come to an end.

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<sup>492</sup> Meserand speech to the New York state AWRT Chapter, 17 November, 1951, Box 8, Folder 19, EMP. LAB.

<sup>493</sup> Meserand speech to the New York city AWRT Chapter, 9 February, 1952, Box 8, Folder 19, EMP. LAB.

### *Seizing an Opportunity – Crafting a New Role*

At the time Edythe Meserand was elected to serve as AWRT’s first president, she could reasonably claim to have had experience in virtually every corner of broadcasting in which women were able to operate. She had performed routine office work, and handled media relations, publicity and marketing. For a brief time, she was on the air as the “Musical Clock Girl;” she also conceived and produced radio programs, often aimed at the commercially important female listener. Given this background, Meserand might be considered a broadcasting “everywoman.” Members of AWRT could relate to her experiences, and felt a connection to her as a capable and skilled professional woman. She had enjoyed success over her 25-year-long broadcasting career. But Meserand had also struggled in the face of workplace prejudice and had experienced the sting of gender bias and discrimination. She had been fired by men in positions of power when she refused to accede to what she considered their inappropriate requests.

Meserand’s public image reflected an accomplished, but non-threatening figure who could serve as an acceptable representative for these women in their efforts to define themselves as professionals. She was one of them. At the same time, Meserand also stood as an example for women who sought opportunities beyond the gender-limiting arenas of the “woman’s place.” She ventured into the male lair of the newsroom, working side-by-side with the men. Meserand had a hand in building what was arguably one of the first and best examples of a local radio newsroom in New York City, the nation’s largest media market. She was a key player in the creation of public affairs and documentary programming designed to satisfy the listening public’s growing demand for news. She had broken through what had been a largely impermeable wall.

She wasn't the first, nor was she the only woman who had found her way into a newsroom role. A review of the historical record reveals a few accounts of women working successfully in broadcast newsrooms in the middle decades of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. Most of these accounts focus on women in network news, like commentators Kathryn Cravens and Dorothy Thompson or executives like Helen Sioussat, who became CBS's Director of Talks when her boss, Edward R. Murrow, went off to Europe to Cover World War II. What distinguished Meserand was her visibility as a woman working in local radio news. Her higher profile resulted, at least in part, from her work in a media mecca ... a prestigious station in the country's most important market. But in addition, as AWRT's first president, she became emblematic of women's efforts to gain visibility and legitimacy within their profession in the early 1950s.

Meserand's carefully constructed image reflected the prevailing social and political climate at the time. Americans were enjoying the benefits of a post-World War II economic expansion, but also worried about the growing menace of Communism. For American women, the picture was somewhat contradictory. There was a heightened emphasis on traditional family values and domesticity, even as the numbers of women entering the workforce, especially married women, continued to grow. Political and social activism was limited largely to the developing civil rights movement. Organized protests and advocacy by and for women was not a prominent feature of the period. It was a conservative time, and Meserand seemed entirely comfortable presenting herself as business-like, but low-key, accomplished, but with a soft, feminine veneer.

We know that Meserand spoke often of her distaste for "pressure" tactics. This was in line with her conservative approach, and may also have reflected an effort



to distance herself from Dorothy Lewis, the woman who had led AWRT's predecessor organization. Lewis was perceived as pushy in her advocacy for "uplifting" and educational radio programs. Clearly, that type of broadcasting had a place on the map of U-S radio programming. Stations had to demonstrate their public service commitment in order to keep their government-issued broadcast licenses. But at its core, the US broadcasting system was a business: corporate interests, driven by a commercial culture. It was, therefore, in Meserand's interest to align herself and the organization she led with the interests of the commercial broadcasting industry. AWRT was created as an independently operated organization, but it retained close ties and a common philosophy with the NAB, the largest and most influential group of commercial broadcasters and the group from which AWRT had emerged.

### *A Reluctant Feminist, Somewhat Transformed*

Edythe Meserand liked to remind audiences that she had grown up with the broadcasting industry, learning over time from tough but generous mentors who pushed her to succeed. As mentioned previously, she often used the careers of other women as examples of professional success. Eventually, however, Meserand presented her own career as a model when she focused on the strategies that she said had allowed her, ultimately, to rise to a position of authority in the male world of the WOR newsroom. She cited her enthusiasm and creativity, an even temperament, an ability to adapt to changing circumstances, and absolute devotion to hard work as the essential elements in her career. "These helped me through some very bad spots over many years ... helped

me meet the challenges ... and helped me over some awfully tall hurdles that I thought I could not handle,” she explained years later.<sup>494</sup>

In presenting herself as a worthy example, Meserand ’s enthusiasm for the professional life she had enjoyed was unmistakable. But her counsel to women included a cautionary tale about the sacrifices women must make in their career pursuits. This usually took the form of generic warnings of long hours, late nights, and a limited life outside the office. However, on a few occasions, the talk of sacrifice became personal when Meserand repeated the story of leaving her intended fiancé in the lurch when she chose to work through the night when England declared war.<sup>495</sup> There is no indication Meserand struggled with this decision, but by raising the issue in her speeches, she addressed a common concern among women who followed a professional trail. Dorothy Thompson, who was the best known female journalist on radio during World War II, urged young women to “think twice” before pursuing a demanding career. Thompson said women might believe they could compete with men in the workplace and at the same time maintain a healthy and productive marriage. But, Thompson said, “...they just can’t.”<sup>496</sup> Thompson spoke from experience; she was married three times; she had one child who, because of her travels, apparently spent much of his childhood in the care of nannies and at boarding school.

Edythe Meserand never identified as a feminist, yet she presented herself as a role model for women in the media industries, and in later life she welcomed the designation as a broadcasting “pioneer.” She did not openly confront gender stereotypes, likely

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<sup>494</sup> Meserand speech at a celebration marking her 50 years in broadcasting, 1 October, 1976, Box 10 Folder 1, EMP. LAB.

<sup>495</sup> Meserand speech to Zonta and Professional Women, 24 March 1971, Box 8 Folder 19, EMP. LAB.

<sup>496</sup> James Wedgewood Drawbell, *Dorothy Thompson’s English Journey* (London: Collins, 1942): 104-106, cited in Hoseley and Yamada, 32.

recognizing that doing so would slow her progress. Instead, she worked obsessively to gain acceptance and overcome any doubt that she was capable of performing whatever task she faced. Meserand adopted an approach that conformed to her environment, quietly demonstrating competence and skill and a willingness to play by male rules.

This research found no evidence that she ever spoke publically in the 1950s and 1960's about the gender discrimination she faced. Nowhere in her speeches or published interviews prior to the 1970s did she describe any of the three instances when she was fired as a result of what could only be called gender bias. She left WOR under different circumstances, presumably related to corporate downsizing. Yet, she never discussed that either. Twenty years passed before Meserand talked openly of any challenges she faced as a women in the WOR newsroom. "It wasn't easy ... and the men didn't make it easier for me. It meant not only hard work, but many sacrifices."<sup>497</sup> These were, she went on to say, choices she did not regret, enabling her to claim, as she so often did, that she had competed on male turf, as an equal.

Subtle changes in the nature of her public remarks, along with some of her activities in later years, suggest that Meserand gradually developed what might be considered a modified brand of feminism. Her conservative views had not changed; she still believed in working within, and not against, the prevailing system. But over time, she demonstrated an emerging willingness to address feminist issues. Meserand's public comments always focused on women's accomplishments, and included an encouraging message in support of women's efforts to achieve higher status and greater recognition. But in some of her later speeches, we find her addressing gender bias in a direct way.

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<sup>497</sup> Meserand speech to Zonta & Business and Professional Women, 24 March, 1971, Box 8 Folder 19, EMP. LAB.

“Certainly I recognize sex discrimination. I realize too, that women in key positions are paid less than men. I firmly believe that the executive world should be one in which men and women work together, and I see a brightening picture for women.”<sup>498</sup>

Her evolution to what I call “adaptive” feminism fit the changing nature of the times and may have represented an effort to remain current and in touch with women’s professional aspirations during a period of re-emerging feminist values. It was, however, a measured adjustment. Significant political developments beginning in the early-1960s drew increased attention to women’s status, and provided the first legal avenue to address discrimination.<sup>499</sup> Yet, Meserand continued to advise women that they were ultimately responsible for their success. In the only available reference she made to legal remedies to challenge discrimination, Meserand said “I feel legislation is not the only answer. The answer rests with women.”<sup>500</sup>

It is important to consider the time frame and context for Meserand’s feminist progression. She was, at this point, operating at a distance from the daily workplace environment. No longer required to perform according to someone else’s rules, she could act and speak more freely, without concern for the consequences. By opening her own business, Meserand took control of her own fate and created a new platform from which she could continue to address women’s professional aspirations.

Meserand’s advertising and public relations work allowed her a type of professional freedom she had never known previously. It also provided an avenue to

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<sup>498</sup> Ibid.

<sup>499</sup> In 1963, a Presidential Commission on the Status of Women revealed substantial evidence of gender inequalities throughout American society. The following year, the Civil Rights Act of 1964 was approved, outlawing discrimination on the basis of race or sex in hiring, promotion, pay or any other condition of employment.

<sup>500</sup> Meserand remarks to Zonta, 24 March, 1971.

extend her career and her life as a public figure in creative ways. She now operated in an “allied field” and so could easily justify the ongoing AWRT contact. She may even have capitalized on these important connections as she built her own small media business. She utilized the journalism skills she had developed over years in the WOR newsroom in her other new role, as an “activist” in the town of Charleston ... leading efforts in historic preservation, writing the town’s history, and serving as town historian. In some respects, her public persona seemed even larger in later years after her move from the large stage of New York City broadcasting to the much smaller arena of rural upstate life. She was an accomplished woman whose professional achievements made her stand out as a “big fish in a small pond.”

#### *Meserand’s Career as an Example for Women*

It was somewhat surprising that this research found no evidence Meserand made any effort to expand opportunities for women in the WOR newsroom. As the assistant director of the department, one might assume she could have used her influence in hiring decisions, although she never claimed to have a role in bringing in the two women who were hired as news writers during the war.<sup>501</sup> She mentioned them only briefly, and not in the most favorable terms. Both did an “adequate job,” Meserand recalled, but one “wasn’t dedicated” and the other got married when the war ended, and immediately resigned.<sup>502</sup>

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<sup>501</sup> Available information indicates these were the only other women who worked in an editorial capacity in the WOR newsroom during Meserand’s 15 years at the station.

<sup>502</sup> Meserand, WPCF, 26.

On the other hand, it does seem reasonable to conclude that Meserand was able to inspire women through her work with AWRT. In her personal papers, and from interviews conducted with some who knew her, there is evidence that she was viewed as an early radio pioneer who embraced the chance to serve as a role-model and mentor, especially in her later years.

Any evaluation of Edythe Meserand's career is complicated by her somewhat enigmatic life. She concealed her immigrant heritage for decades but treasured her deep family connections. She came of age in the 1920s, a period of unprecedented personal liberation for women; yet, she continued to live at home with her extended Italian family ... not only her parents, but also her sister and brother-in-law ... until she was well into her professional life. On at least one occasion, she bragged about her speakeasy cards, and in many available photographs, she is pictured with a cigarette in hand. Yet, she avoided the use of makeup, and cultivated a conservative, lady-like image which she considered essential to a professional woman's career.

She declared herself strongly anti-organization but had her greatest influence as a result of her decades-long association with AWRT. She gradually adopted a modified form of feminism, but for years avoided any mention of the gender challenges that she faced.

Viewed only through Meserand's own words, one finds limited insight into the frustrations and failures she experienced over the years. What emerges is a carefully crafted picture seemingly designed to portray a successful career built on determination, dedication and individual achievement. Even when she discussed the most productive and successful portion of her broadcasting career, she avoided nearly all mention of

conflict and she minimized the discrimination that she had clearly faced. When her career in daily broadcasting ended, Meserand offered little to help explain why she did not pursue another position in the field.

The challenge in telling Edythe Meserand's story is not unique. Maurine Beasley has discussed the value and the limitations presented by women's oral histories. They are, she writes, an "archival treasure, but women telling their own stories may or may not demonstrate the ability to analyze their own experiences."<sup>503</sup> Edythe Meserand demonstrated little inclination to offer a discerning view of her own life's work. In the absence of that critical perspective, we are left to scrutinize the timing and context of the messages she did share, and suggest a rationale for what she did not say.

This dissertation has offered a case study of one woman's unlikely journey through broadcasting's early decades. Her strategies for success reflected both her times, and the conservative nature of the broadcasting business. Her work philosophy, and the values she urged other broadcasting women to embrace emphasized the traditional principles of hard work and individual achievement.

Such a conservative approach did, indeed, fit neatly with the social and political environment in the early 1950s when she left day-to-day broadcasting, and transitioned into her role as an early leader of the only organization for women in the media industries. These themes remained central to Meserand's message, even as the stirrings of a new feminist wave began to appear. She remained an enthusiastic, but cautious voice in her mantra stressing performance and dedication. Meserand

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<sup>503</sup> Maurine H. Beasley, "Recent Directions for the Study of Women's History in American Journalism," *Journalism Studies*, Vol. 2, No. 2, (2001): 216-217.

offered herself as an example of a professional woman who did not challenge the status quo, but still managed to compete as an equal on the male playing field.

### Capstone on a Professional Life

Meserand's association with AWRT is key to understanding the most enduring aspect of her professional legacy. Through her twenty-five years in daily broadcasting she demonstrated great ambition, enormous tenacity and a poise that allowed her to withstand the rocky journey along a path where she was not always welcomed. Over the years, she had some lucky breaks and good timing. She enjoyed the support of a few helpful mentors. She was actively engaged in the development and production of radio news programming during the critical period of World War II. But it was only after she became involved with AWRT that Meserand seemed fully ready to display the confidence that would be required to lead other women in search of professional success.

Meserand came to view the organization as a primary resource for women seeking a broadcasting career. Whenever she addressed audiences from the AWRT platform, she delivered a message aimed at empowering women and inspiring them to achieve. The group could, she believed, provide women with the necessary tools to function in a competitive media environment. On the group's fortieth anniversary, Meserand said AWRT continued to open doors for women by remaining true to its core mission of "encouraging, informing, and guiding women," and providing "a place for them to share and celebrate their pride in the work they do."<sup>504</sup>

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<sup>504</sup> Meserand speech to the AWRT national conference, 16 May, 1991. Box 8 Folder 19, EMP. LAB.



This was, in many respects a remarkable conversion for Meserand. The reluctant organizer with her strong anti-organization views had been transformed. She watched as women reveled in their new opportunities to commiserate with others who shared their experiences. She observed their efforts to gain greater professional recognition. She celebrated their growing aspirations and achievements. AWRT had become a welcoming community for women broadcasters. Edythe Meserand embraced her role as their first leader.

The full circle of that transformation was apparent in one of the final speeches she prepared for delivery in 1995 to the upstate New York Capital district chapter which had become her AWRT home. The women who had founded and organized the group “recognized the value of networking long before the term was coined,” she said. “The ladies in hats and white gloves ... knew what they were doing.”<sup>505</sup> Edythe Meserand would not have acknowledged this on that April morning in 1951 when she was elected the group’s first leader. She grew into the role which gave her the opportunity to become an influential and inspirational advocate for women in broadcasting, who would herself, always keep a clean pair of white gloves in the desk drawer.

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<sup>505</sup> Meserand remarks prepared for delivery to the Capital district chapter of AWRT, Albany, 25 April, 1995. Based on hand-written notations on the speech text, it appears this was actually delivered by Meserand’s companion, Jane Barton because Meserand was ill. Box 8, Folder 19, EMP. LAB.

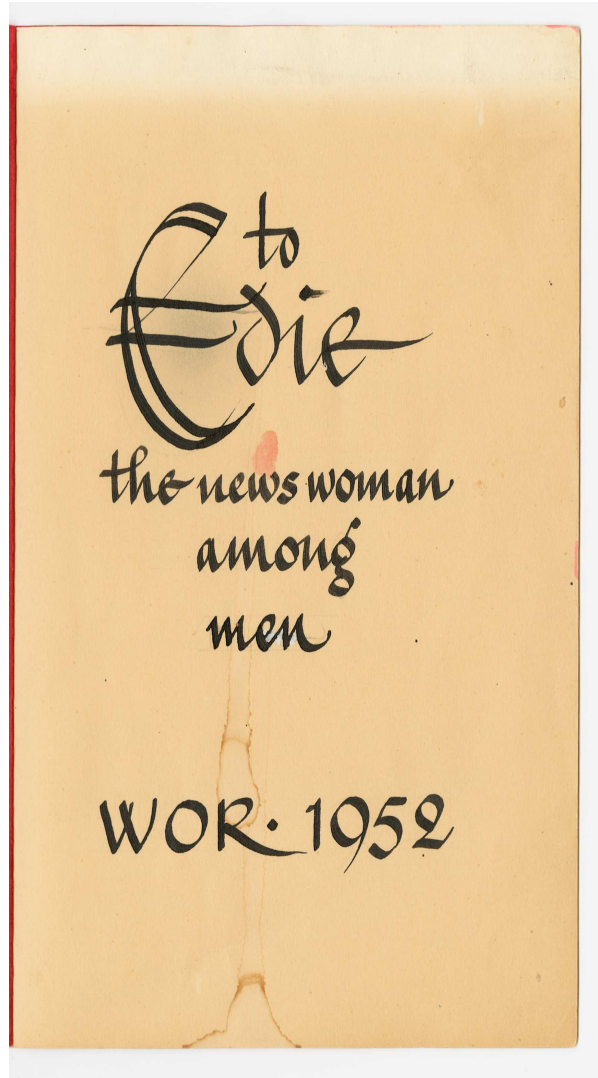


FIGURE 12 Card given to Edythe Meserand

This card was given to Meserand when she left WOR in the fall of 1952. It was signed by the seventeen men she worked with in the WOR newsroom.

#### *Suggestions for Future Research*

Edythe Meserand's career, specifically at WOR beginning in September 1939 until her departure in the fall of 1952, reveals the significant role played behind the scenes in the production of news and public affairs by both men AND women. The considerable work which happens "behind the microphone" or "off-camera" is not

glamorous. This largely obscure area is generally not one on which memorable careers are built. The names of the writers, editors and producers who create programs are often never known. A fuller and more inclusive story of the history and development of broadcast journalism could emerge with future research on this aspect of news production.

Meserand's professional journey began at the dawn of the network era. Her entry into broadcasting at NBC coincided with the fledgling network's launch, and any examination of her life had to address these early, formative years. Networks have been the vehicle through which most of broadcasting history has been told. The central role played by broadcasting in America's cultural history is depicted through stories of the networks. Indeed, these "webs" or "chains" that connected people across the country led the way in defining the terms and setting the standards for programming and production. Notwithstanding the significance, this neglects an important piece of the industry's development. From the earliest days of radio, most of the programming, including news, originated locally. Very little of this has been preserved, which makes an accounting of its scope and subject matter challenging, at the very least. Determined researchers may recreate portions of radio schedules by scouring old newspaper and magazine accounts for program listings and profiles of the personalities involved. This daunting task would seem more manageable in the case of a small number of the most influential radio stations in the country, including WOR. In 1984, the station donated a substantial archive to the Library of Congress. The collection includes thousands of hours of programming on twenty thousand acetate tapes across an array of genres, including

musical variety, drama, comedy, soap opera, documentary and news.<sup>506</sup> The New York Times called it an “electronic chronicle” covering “sixty years of American history,” ranging from the announcement of the attack on Pearl Harbor to a commercial that talented newcomer, Beverly Sills, sang for the detergent, Rinso White.<sup>507</sup> The manuscript portion of the WOR archive is being processed, and is not yet available for public use. Examination of the full record of this WOR history, and a search for other local station archives, seems an area ripe with possibilities. Future accounts of these stations, and of people like Edythe Meserand who created the programs they broadcast, could contribute a new dimension to the rich history of broadcasting.

Finally, while it is beyond the scope of this research to delve more deeply into the work of AWRT, further study of the organization would provide important insight into the changing scene for women in broadcasting. The group’s name was changed in 2010 to the Alliance for Women in Media to reflect a commitment to women across the broad spectrum of electronic media forms. Its fundamental mission remains focused on enhancing women’s opportunities and advancing their careers, but in a changed and changing media landscape, the tools to support the mission have surely changed. Examination of the group’s initiatives, especially in the period following Meserand’s active involvement, research on the group’s advocacy and research work, along with an evaluation of its standing among women and within the industry could

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<sup>506</sup> Library of Congress, Recorded Sound Division, WOR Collection.  
<http://memory.loc.gov/ammem/awhhtml/awrs9/wor.html>.

<sup>507</sup> Richard F. Shepard, *New York Times*, 17 September, 1984, Sec. C, 17.

provide a valuable picture of the paths taken by today’s professional women and the place of women’s organizations in their daily lives.<sup>508</sup>

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<sup>508</sup> According to the Alliance for Women in Media website, the group now claims to have “nearly 10,000 community members” including both men and women who work in all aspects of media and related fields. <http://allwomeninmedia.org/learn-about-us/who-we-are>

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### Abbreviations

AWRT	American Women in Radio and Television Archive
BP	Broadcast Pioneers Oral History Collection
EMP	Edythe Meserand Papers
LAB	Library of American Broadcasting
LOC	Library of Congress
LTR	Letter
MEM	Memorandum
WPCF	Washington Press Club Foundation, Women in Journalism Oral History Project

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NOTE: Many issues of *Broadcasting* were reviewed in the course of this research. Most were accessed via an on-line archive portal.

[americanradiohistory.com/Broadcasting\\_Individual\\_Issues\\_Guide.htm](http://americanradiohistory.com/Broadcasting_Individual_Issues_Guide.htm)

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