

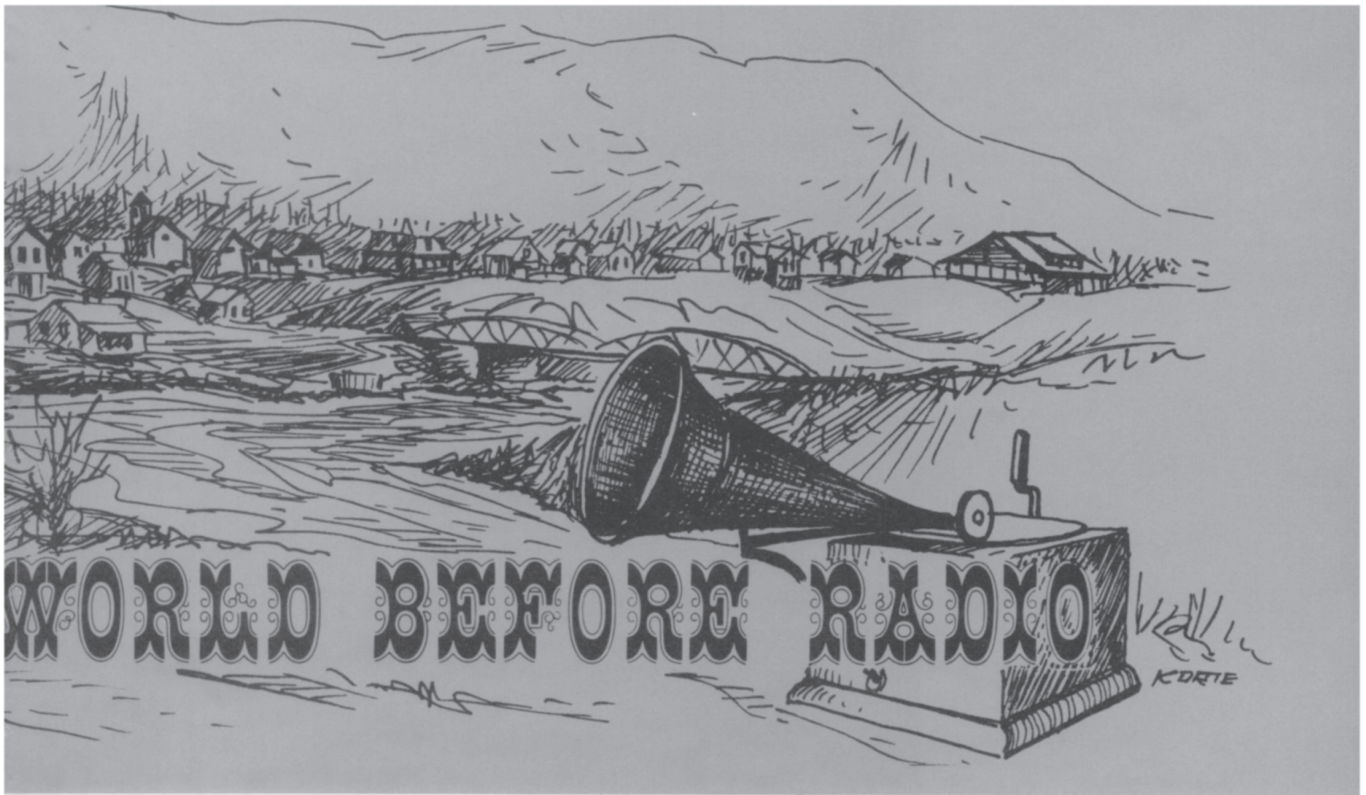
by DOROTHY M. JOHNSON

Youngsters didn't demand much in the way of entertainment when I was growing up in Whitefish, Montana. We didn't fret about ways to fill up time, because there was little of it to spare. Grownups worked very long hours, and kids went to school from nine to four with an hour and a quarter off for dinner. (Call it lunch if you want to, but we didn't.) We didn't go home even at four if we were caught doing something forbidden. It takes quite a while to write "I must not chew gum in school" 100 times. After school there was kindling to split and firewood to carry in and snow to shovel. So we all kept fairly busy, and just getting your cold, wet feet dry by the stove without scorching your shoes was entertainment of a kind. At least it was a challenge.

Our world was quiet. Music came only when invited; you had to do more than flip a switch. If you had a phonograph, usually called a victor-ola, it played one short-term record at a time and you wound it carefully before each record and also put in a new needle. Then you sat back and listened. What you got was not just background decibels to do something else by. It was something you wanted to hear.

There was, of course, music heard in passing: Evelyn Stacey

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practicing her piano lesson, some big boy's slide trombone moaning because he was in the Whitefish Boys Band, or a railroad man called Scotty, who was determined to learn the bagpipes and marched all over town doing it because you can't play the pipes while sitting still at home.

Most of our entertainment was home talent (to use the word loosely), but I realize now that we had a few resident performers who were too good for us. Mrs. Bernard was one. She was a handsome blonde lady who often appeared on stage at public gatherings in the Masonic Temple, wearing a satin dress with a small train. She was much in demand for vocal solos, and she sang the national anthem whenever it was needed. (There used to be some disagreement about what the national anthem was; opinion divided about 50-50 between The Star-Spangled Banner and My Country 'Tis of Thee.)

Our elders whispered behind their hands that Mrs. Bernard had a Trained Voice, and she did indeed sound a lot different from the ladies in the church choir. But we little Philistines who had never heard classical music sung by a professional thought she was hilarious. She must have been lonely amid the alien corn. She was too good for the likes of us, and I wish I could tell her so.

One kind of entertainment that drew a good house in our town was any church's Christmas program. The first time I took part, a few days after my eighth birthday, I was in a line of wiggling little girls who sang. They all swayed in unison except me, the new girl in town. First the child on my left would bump me, then the child on my right. I glared and stood like a rock. Nobody had told ME to sway. Nobody had told them, either, this time, but their act the year before had required it, and they still thought they ought to do it that way, every Christmas until the end of the world.

I used to pass the time between acts by staring up at the stove pipe. Before our church had a basement and a furnace, the building was heated with a big wood-burning stove that was quite far from the chimney. They were tenuously connected with yards and yards of black stovepipe, and it was interesting to calculate which members of the enraptured audience were in the best position to get a lap full of soot if and when the pipe fell down.

## Saturday Nights in Town

Just going downtown on Saturday night to do some trading was entertainment. What was called trading then is what we call shopping now. No matter how it sounds, it didn't involve exchanging beaver pews for Green River knives. The medium of exchange was ordinary money, except that anybody who was anybody charged everything to an account that was settled once a month, on payday. If you did your trading in cash, it was because your credit was no good.

Saturday night trading expeditions involved whole families, even though only one member might be needing a major investment, like shoes or a coat. Kids went along gladly because there was always the chance that the father of the family might end the evening by treating his little flock to cones at Mr. Matthews' ice cream parlor. Whitefish was festive on Saturday night, with people buying groceries, fingering merchandise they wished they could afford, and socializing with chance-met friends.

That was before you pushed a wire cart, helped yourself off the shelves, and paid cash at the checkout stand. The old way was more personal. You told Mr. Cooke or Mr. Crum (depending on whose store you patronized) what you wanted, and he reached up behind him and brought it down and scribbled on a charge slip. Grocers had worse handwriting than doctors. When the lady of the house tried to check those slips against the monthly statement, she got pretty frustrated. She knew very well she had never bought 3 tm pfw in her whole life. She wouldn't have known how to cook it.



## Speaking a Piece

More formal entertainments, connected with school or church, were frequent. Recitations were much in demand at public gatherings. Miss Jessica Reed, who taught English, was great at this. She could be three or four people all at once and furthermore do it in memorized prose, which is harder to learn than poetry, and with appropriate gestures. When Miss Reed did it, the number was called a reading. When kids did it, we spoke a piece.

Almost any child could speak a piece on short notice. We did a lot of memorizing, some of it voluntary. The other day a friend of mine remarked, a propos of nothing:

*Lars Porsena of Clusium, by the Nine Gods he swore  
That the great house of Tarquin should suffer wrong no more.*

To which I responded:

*By the Nine Gods he swore it, and named a trysting-day,  
And bade his messengers ride forth, east and west and south  
and north to summon his array.*

We, my friend and I, are of the generation that loved the excitement of *Horatius at the Bridge* and memorized miles of it, just for fun. "O Tiber! Father Tiber! to whom the Romans pray, a Roman's life, a Roman's arms, take thou in charge this day!" Nobody had told us that the world would end, not with a bang, but with a whimper. We grew up admiring bangs and clashes and fights against hopeless odds, with no whimpers. When brave Horatius, the captain of the gate, wounded and wearing his armor, made it safely to shore, even the enemy cheered. We believed that Sir Galahad's strength was as the strength of ten because his heart was pure, and if we ourselves were pretty feeble it must be because we had done something naughty.

One of my most acclaimed efforts was *The Burial of Moses*. I thought people applauded because I did it so well. Now I suspect it was the lisp that fascinated them:

*By Nebo'th lonely mountain, on thith thide Jordan'th wave,  
In a vale in the land of Moab there lieth a lonely grave.  
And no man knowth that thepulchre and no man thaw it e'er,  
For the angelth of God upturned the thod and laid the dead  
man there.*

Too bad memorizing has gone out of style. I can still draw, for my own pleasure, on an endless treasure of poetry and Bible verses, do the Gettysburg Address for a typing exercise, and show off with "Twinkle, twinkle, little star" in Latin.

Small localized entertainments took place in grade school in a rite known as a peanut shower. If a class liked its teacher, some brave kid confided in the teacher in the next room: Would she please call Miss Tobias out on some pretext late Friday afternoon? She obliged, and when Miss Tobias came back, she was pelted with peanuts in their shells. She expressed astonishment and delight at being so honored, and the class laughed and shrieked and ate the peanuts. I never noticed whether the guest of honor got any. The janitor must have hated us.

Dramatic offerings consisted of high school plays, staged at the Orpheum The-ay-ter. Virtually nobody had ever seen a professional cast at work, so standards weren't awfully high. The height of praise was, "They sure learned their parts good." The English teacher, who was also the drama coach, was restricted in her choice of plays by the fact that very few boys were available. In one play about high society a man was needed, and I got the part for two reasons: it was supposed to be funny anyway, and I knew Shorty Gammel, lineman at the Mountain States Power Company, well enough to borrow his dress suit. It was the only one in town. Shorty enjoyed a good laugh, so he



also loaned me the red shirt that, as fire chief, he wore to official social functions of the Volunteer Fire Department. That costume put the audience at ease right away; they could see that the production was supposed to be funny, so they didn't have to act respectful.

Big kids (this was before teen-agers were discovered) occasionally passed some spare time around the big Victor-ola at Mr. Haines's drugstore, pretending they were thinking of buying a record. This didn't fool Mr. Haines for a minute. No kid ever had money to waste on a record. But he played along for a reasonable length of time before telling us tactfully that maybe we ought to go do something else.

## The Literary Society

In high school we encountered an institution called Literary Society. Entertainment it was not, although maybe it was supposed to be. The school administration made no attempt to sell the idea to the student body. Literary Society was just plain required. Twice a year every last one of us in Whitefish High School — about a hundred, maybe a few more — had to get up in front of all the rest and suffer publicly through a personal appearance that was sometimes as hard on the audience as it was on the unwilling performer. We had to do it to pass English, and we had to pass English to graduate. There were lots of dropouts, but they may have had other reasons.

Literary Society was divided into the Alphas and the Thetas. Perhaps it was hoped that lively competition would result and make everybody eager to participate. It didn't work out that way. Everybody I knew hated both Alpha and Theta with a total lack of prejudice.

Literary Society wasn't necessarily literary. A girl who played the piano could fulfill her obligation with a solo. The rest of us envied the piano players because they performed with their backs to the audience. A kid could recite something memorized or participate in a group musical presentation or appear in a theoretically comical skit on the stage. We never knew where those silly little dramas came from, but any fool could tell they weren't literature. A boy who was paralyzed by the idea of doing *anything* might get off with writing an extra theme and mumbling it down his shirt front while the rest of us suffered with him.

Once a girl named Susan (or was it Gertrude?) surprised everybody by reading a long romantic poem that she had written herself. This went over well with everybody but me. I was jealous as hell. I was the one who wrote poetry around there; everybody knew that. And here was this rank amateur, with no reputation for it being smiled upon by the muse, stealing my thunder!

Next time my turn came to do or die for Alpha, naturally I approached the teacher with the suggestion that if a poetry reading of one's own work were desirable, I'd be glad to contribute. I would write something special and recite it from memory. But the teacher felt that Susan's offering was all that was needed along that line. Instead, I was one of the ham actors in a corny little skit involving such characters as never lived on land or sea. I was Squire somebody, a bucolic party wearing overalls, with an empty corn cob pipe between my teeth.



Possibly this mass agony, which took place every other Friday afternoon, was supposed to prepare us to take our place in civilized society and speak on our feet glibly, helping the nation to advance. What it really did was to convince us that we wanted no part of public life whatever.

There was one way to evade the Alphas and the Thetas. That was to make the debating team. I took this way out my last two years in high school. The three girls on our team learned more than we ever wanted to know about compulsory arbitration of labor disputes and whether Orientals should have the right to become U.S. citizens.

Once Whitefish debated Shelby, and neither school could afford to send the team all the way to the other town, so we met in Browning before an audience composed almost entirely of Blackfeet Indians. One of our team members missed the train, leaving only two of us, Audrey Deighton and me, to face three young geniuses from Shelby. We were awfully scared. I picked out a motherly-looking Blackfeet lady in the front row and orated directly to her because she kept smiling as if she hoped our side would win. Her obvious good will kept me from collapsing. And after all that tension, I don't remember which school won the debate.

## Movies at the The-ay-ter

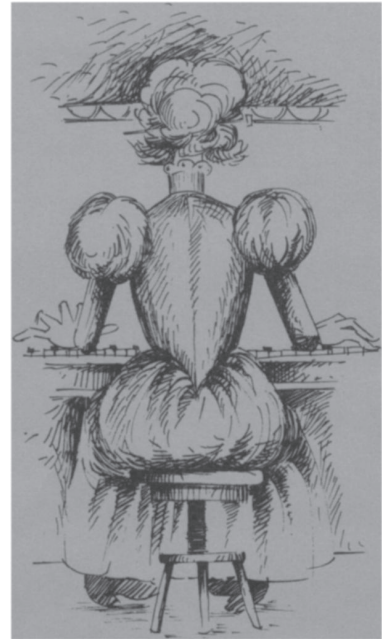
Movies were the one entertainment gift from the outside world that we could depend on. The Orpheum The-ay-ter had one every night, plus a Saturday matinee. They were, of course, silent movies except that quite a lot of people read the subtitles aloud: "In a vine-covered cottage dwelt a maiden fair," and there was Lillian Gish. "Drop that pistol!" and there, steely-eyed and thin of lip, was William S. Hart.

Mr. Sissel owned the theater, took the tickets, and I think ran the projector. Mrs. Sissel manned the boxoffice and provided the piano accompaniment — sweet, soft tinklings for love scenes, violent thumping for the U.S. Cavalry galloping to save a wagon train.

My mother had a pass good for every night, courtesy of the management, because she was city treasurer. Thus I should have been a steady customer, but we had a rule at our house: no more than one show a week. Probably the purpose was to strengthen my character through deprivation.

That was before double features; we got one main feature, one short custard-pie-type comedy, maybe a travelogue with the last subtitle reading, "And so we sail into the sunset, leaving beautiful Madagascar." Coming Attractions and slides advertising local emporia. There was also a cracked glass slide that came on several times; it admonished the audience to be patient while the operator was changing the reel.

The most spectacular movie I remember was *A Daughter of the Gods*, starring Annette Kellerman doing her celebrated sixty-foot dive, or maybe it was eighty. Word got around that she did it in the nude, which was the genteel way of saying stark naked. Hardly anyone believed that, but the turnout was tremendous. The primmest, godliest people in town flocked to that show, because how could they complain unless they saw it with their own eyes?



The dive was, after all, disappointing. The star sped along the far side of some bushes and dived, all right, but she moved so fast that, no matter how hard you squinted, you couldn't tell whether she was naked or not. There should have been an instant replay.

I was small enough to believe everything I saw when Mary Pickford came along in a romantic tid-bit called *Hearts Adrift*. There was this girl all by herself on an island, see, she'd been shipwrecked or something, and her only companion was her pet wolf, see. Then a man was washed up on shore and she had a baby — but how could she when there was no preacher to marry them? — and he went away and she jumped into a convenient volcano with the baby in her arms.

I wept buckets of tears and was not entirely consoled when my mother assured me that little Mary didn't jump into a real volcano but would be back in other movies. When Mary Pickford and I were about 35 years older, I had lunch with her in New York and was gratified to note that the volcano hadn't left any scars. The lunch was arranged by my agent, who thought I should help her write her autobiography. Later I interviewed her at her apartment, trying to believe it was really the Johnson kid from Whitefish who was following Mary Pickford around for a look at the family photographs. I moved back to Montana before anything came of the book idea, and someone else helped her write it.

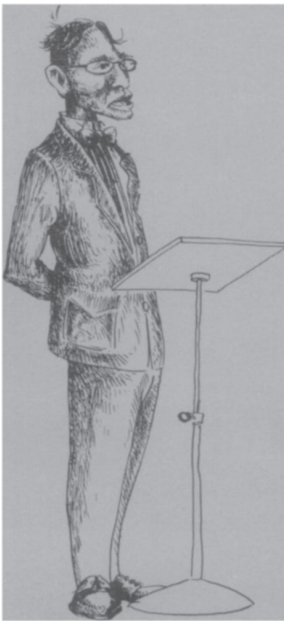
## Concentrated Culture

From the great outside world Whitefish received, in addition to movies, Chautauqua in summer, Lyceum in winter, and almost nothing else. But once a carnival came to town, and local housewives took the wash off the line so it wouldn't be stolen. No doubt this was prudent, but why would those beautiful visitors, the painted ladies and the swaggering men, want a bunch of well-worn diapers or a locomotive fireman's longjohns?

The carnival had to have a city license, and when the manager arranged this with my mother he buttered up everybody in City Hall, especially the police, by handing out passes. With my mother's pass in hand, I became the carnival's best customer. Ah, the wonders! — and all for free. Three times I shuddered happily at the snake charmer's booth, twice I stood breathless while the dare-devil death-defying motorcyclists whirled around in their wooden pit, and I rode the merry-go-round something like eighty times.

Chautauqua was five days of concentrated culture, including inspirational lectures, all kinds of musical and dramatic performances, and acts that, under less elevated sponsorship, would have been vaudeville. All this took place in a big gray tent, with the audience sitting on benches built of planks and trying to keep cool by waving palm-leaf fans.

Chautauqua held forth both afternoon and evening, and I had to attend every performance to which a season ticket entitled me. My mother had a high opinion of culture, and I wasn't really opposed, but Chautauqua came during our all-too-short swimming season, when any sensible kid wanted to be over at Whitefish Lake.



For children there was even morning activity, rehearsing for a big song-and-dance performance by the local small fry at the end of the five days. I got roped into this just once. The harried lady who rehearsed us found out soon enough that the little Johnson girl couldn't carry a tune, so she tactfully diverted me to something called the Dance of the Russian Snowflakes. When she realized — as I already had — that I didn't qualify for that either, we parted by mutual consent, without recriminations.

Lyceum was even more cultural. It came to the high school auditorium for an occasional evening performance during the winter. Lyceum attracted the intelligentsia. It featured chalk talks, travel lectures, and stuff like that. The only performance I can remember was yodeling by a Swiss family. For quite a while after that you could hear strangled attempts at yodeling all over town.

## Walking to the Post Office

In spite of this breathless round of entertainment, sometimes there just wasn't anything to do. On a lazy Sunday afternoon, one could take part in the time-honored ceremony of Walking Down to the Post Office. If, on the way, I stopped in and picked up Marguerite Cole, we giggled all the way. Girls in their early teens DO giggle, and anyway we were accomplices in a little smuggling operation. The contraband was books. Her father had some of the Tarzan books, also *She* by H. Rider Haggard. My mother didn't want me to read such stuff, but books were scarce, there was no public library, and I had already been through all ours two or three times. So Marguerite got me *She* and a bunch of Tarzans and I hid them under the front steps at home.

When we were sophomores, our Sunday giggling was close to hysteria, because on Monday we had to go back to school and fight Julius Caesar. We were home from the Gallic Wars only on a week-end pass. We two were the entire class in Latin II. Ranged against us trembling recruits were Caesar and his legions, backed by Miss Robertson, who was always on his side.

Or, to change the metaphor, we were unwilling gladiators in the arena, expected to beat our tin swords on our wooden shields and roar manfully, "Ave Caesar, morituri te salutant!" To which he could reply complacently, "Veni, vidi, vici."

To get back to the post office: one did not go there with the expectation of finding any mail. It was just a goal. If Marguerite wasn't available, I strolled alone and dreamed. Something marvelous might be waiting at the post office. Even when Box 41 was obviously empty, I turned the little knob to the remembered combination and slid my hand in to make sure the emptiness wasn't an optical illusion. Ah, well, maybe next time. The letters that might have come were wonderful. Like this:

"We read your poem in your school paper with profound admiration, and we are going to print it in our magazine. Our check for \$100 is enclosed. [\$100 was the largest sum I could imagine.] We want to publish everything you write from now on forever."



Or ardent letters from an unknown admirer, either a duke or a misunderstood outlaw, who didn't sign his name because he felt he wasn't worthy. Or notification that I was the heiress to vast estates in England, where my Grandpa Barlow came from. (He wasn't heir to anything.) Or just a kindly reassurance that I did have talent as a basketball player and it wasn't my fault when the ball hit me square in the face and knocked my glasses off.

None of those dreams-of-glory letters came, but I remember fondly the ritual of going down to the post office and I recommend dreaming. Because some dreams come true, even more abundantly than the dreamer had hoped. Years later, but not in Whitefish, a letter from the Saturday Evening Post told me they were buying four short stories all at once for many times \$100. I almost swooned. No editor has yet expressed a wish to publish everything I write. Ah, well, you can't have everything.

## And Then the World Changed

In Whitefish, with its simple pleasures, we lived in a quiet, cozy, isolated little world. When we began to hear about radio (or raddio, as some people preferred to pronounce it), we had no inkling of how much this complicated curiosity was going to change our lives.

Magazines began to publish directions for making a crystal set to receive broadcasts. You started by winding a lot of copper wire around a Quaker Oats box, and that was where I stopped, too. There was nothing to receive on a crystal set except Morse code from a big sending set that the Dugan boys had concocted, and I wasn't going to learn Morse.

A man over at the lake bought a really powerful, expensive receiving set with lots of vacuum tubes. He could get programs from far away if the weather was just right. If it wasn't, he got static. His set had a speaker horn like a *Victor-ola*.

About 1923 I pried myself loose from \$20.00 and indulged in a secondhand two-tube set with earphones, three dials, and a lot of batteries that stood on the floor and had to be wired up exactly right. Getting anything other than squeals and howls depended on luck and twisting those dials around.

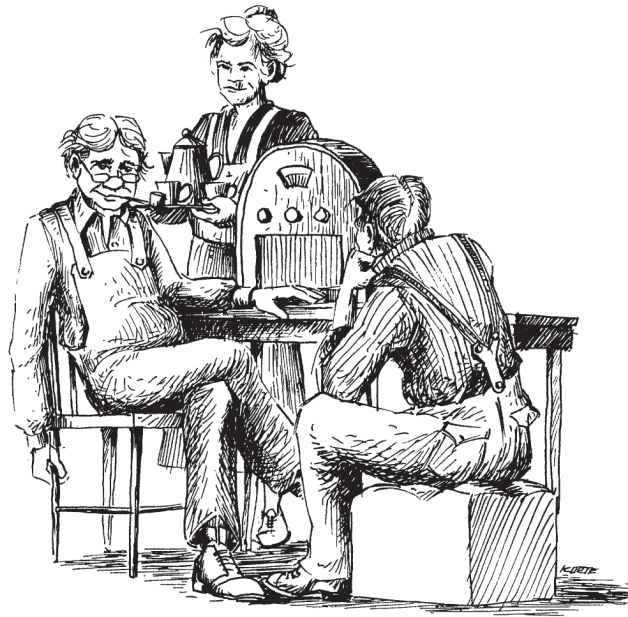
There was no broadcasting station within hundreds of miles, so nobody was choosy about programs. What everybody wanted was distance. I was delighted with a lecture on raising baby chickens emanating from Lincoln, Nebraska; sometimes Pittsburgh came in loud and clear (or anyway clear); once I even got Schenectady, New York. It was customary for the triumphant listener to write a post card to the far-away station with the good news, "I heard you last night just fine at 8:45," and for the station to acknowledge this gratefully.

More broadcasting stations were established. Then there were networks. An unbelievable prophecy, that sometime you could ditch that herd of big batteries and simply plug into an electric connection, came true. There was competition among broadcasters, and listeners could pick and choose their programs.

Everybody, all over, could listen to the same demagogues, howl at the same comedians, make a fad of the same new slang. Everybody with a radio — no longer called a receiving set — suddenly was sophisticated, part of the great outside world. So why should small towns provide their own amateur entertainment when professionals could do it better and the audience didn't even have to leave home?

Whitefish used to have some real characters. They had to struggle to survive as characters after the radio professionals took over, with teams of highly paid people to write their dialogue.

Listeners became addicts, so accustomed to having sounds of any old kind coming into the house that they were nervous when it was quiet. It was easier to leave the radio on and not listen than to bear the unaccustomed silence. For better or worse, the quiet, the isolation, the parochialism were gone. As time passes, there will be nobody to remember.



Illustrations by  
Ken Korte

*With this segment, we conclude, with some nostalgia of our own, the current series of Dorothy Johnson's memories of her youthful years in Whitefish, Montana. Her articles have brought a host of reminiscences to our editorial office; some of them have been and are reprinted in the Letters to the Editor column. Many of us are perhaps mildly disturbed at the realization that we are old enough now so that we and our early experiences are a part of history and indeed have already taken on some of the patina thereof. Nonetheless, it is through memories of this kind that future historians will come to understand how it was in the earlier years of the Twentieth Century. When such understanding comes through the vehicle of humorous reminiscence, all of us, young and not-so-young, share the feast.*