

Dethroning *Ma Perkins*: The Radio Career of Caroline Ellis
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Though all but forgotten to radio historians and old time radio enthusiasts, Caroline Crockett Ellis can lay claim to not only being Kansas City's most prominent aural homemaker, she is one of the very few who received a network timeslot on which to ply her radio craft. Nothing is known of her early life other than that she was likely born and raised in rural Kansas on July 19, 1877. In later years she claimed to have been engaged in farming before getting into radio – and by that she meant cooking meals for thrashers and breeding hogs for commercial markets. This evidence suggests she was a farmer's wife, an occupation far removed from the relatively glamorous role of radio star which awaited her.

On the side, possibly in the late teens, Ellis began doing some writing, initially for the now-defunct *Kansas City Post* which was then published by a clergyman named Dr. Burriss Jenkins. Instead of beginning with an anonymous column or social piece she jumped right in with editorials and a column under her own name. Though she is not known to have lived in Colorado, Ellis also contributed editorials columns to the *Denver Post*. She continued as a social leader in an unknown Kansas town until 1923 when she was widowed. It seems reasonable to conclude that Ellis' husband was killed in an agricultural accident though there's no record to confirm this as of yet.

Now widowed and without any significant income Caroline Ellis entered retail, perhaps a field more open to women than most others of the time. Her first professional job in this capacity was in Detroit with the J. L. Hudson Store where she worked in the book department. Why she chose Detroit – a world away from rural Kansas – is not known. Perhaps she had friends or family connections to the region. Ellis proved adept enough in her new career path that she resigned her position with Hudson after one year, in 1924, and joined Crowley, Milner and Company. She worked hard learning the ins and outs of the retail industry and was promoted to manager of the company's superintendent's office by 1928. Tired of Detroit or seeing more opportunity in Kansas City, Ellis left Crowley-Milner and joined the Jones Store where she worked as the company's educational director. It was an unusual job title – the accompanying duties are unknown – but she again proved more than competent and in four short years she was charged with purchasing responsibilities, choosing such goods for the Jones Store to carry as coats, suits, dresses, and furs. That year, 1932, nearly a full decade after her husband's death, introduced Ellis to the burgeoning radio industry. Late that summer an account executive, whose name and agency are forgotten, approached the small Kansas City station KMBC looking for a merchandising idea.

Though now one of Kansas City's major media outlets, in 1932 KMBC was a small, struggling radio station under the guidance of Arthur Church. Founded around 1927 or 1928 depending on how one wants to date its beginnings, the station was an early affiliate of CBS which had been created about the same time and struggled in the shadow of might

NBC. Church's radio roots date back to 1914 when he discovered amateur radio as a high school senior. Little did the young man from Lamoni, IA, realize that this new technology would be the center of his life for the next four decades as a salesman, operator, teacher, and eventually president of KMBC which he sold in the early 1950s. Church's little station may have been struggling in 1932 during the depths of the Great Depression but this did not diminish his keen eye for talent. He'd already discovered and lost Goodman Ace, a crack comedian whose *Easy Aces* program graced the airwaves for fifteen years and whose writing career lasted for decades. Church's other early discoveries included Hugh Studebaker, who became a prominent soap opera actor in Chicago, Ted Malone, who had various poetry programs locally and nationally, and the Texas Rangers, a western group which eventually appeared not only on radio but on records, film, and television. All of these performers lasted the length of radio's so-called golden age.

Caroline Ellis attracted the attention of Church and KMBC executives in 1932 and she was hired to work on a new program called *Joanne Taylor's Fashion Flashes*. Sponsored by Kansas City's John Taylor Dry Goods Ellis was to portray Joanne Taylor, a personal shopper for the business. Yet it wasn't a straight "infomercial" program; Ellis' character Taylor had a secretary, a "wise-cracking" office boy, and an African-American porter "for comedy relief." Records don't indicate who played these other roles but they may have included the actors noted above; Malone and Studebaker were involved in about every aspect of KMBC productions and wrote and acted in most of their dramatic features. One of the Texas Rangers would later play a stereotypically bufoonish African-American chef on the 1934 series *Red Horse Ranch*. Yet despite the multiple characters, the show's premise was simple; Taylor would talk to her staff members and customers who dropped in to the John Taylor Dry Goods store. After nearly a year of preparation *Joanne Taylor's Fashion Flashes* launched on KMBC on May 1, 1933.

Ellis' initial foray into radio was an unqualified success. Promotional records indicate that the sponsor, John Taylor's, had secured new customers in 182 Missouri and Kansas counties within a few months. Within three years charge accounts outside of Kansas City were four times their 1932 level. KMBC was spreading Ellis' commercial message far beyond the city's borders. Though Ellis left *Fashion Flashes* in 1936 after three years, the show was still being broadcast in 1946, thirteen years after its debut and in much the same format as originally devised by Caroline Ellis in 1933.

In early 1936 Montgomery Ward approached Ellis and made her an offer to appear on a transcribed program broadcast over fourteen stations throughout the Midwest. Several episodes of this daily quarter-hour series, dubbed *The Travels of Mary Ward*, have survived, likely due to its being transcribed, and circulate among old time radio collectors. One sample episode gives contemporary radio historians a glimpse into the format of the program. Characters include a boy named Clifford, a black-dialected porter named Henry (reminiscent of *Fashion Flashes*) who claims descent from John Henry, Mary Ward, an unnamed secretary, and unnamed male colleague. Mary composes a letter to a satisfied customer

promoting a contest and recommending some goods from the latest Ward's catalog.

Mary Ward was every bit the saleswoman that Montgomery Ward hoped. After being on the air for one month, a single announcement sold over 1,600 pairs of panty hose. Other brief announcements sold 9,300 yards of the fabric percale and 7,200 towels. When Ellis casually mentioned a face powder nearly fourteen thousand requests poured in for sample boxes. Surveys by the company indicated that listeners had increased their Ward's purchases nearly 150%. A series of a dozen announcements plugging the Sears catalog resulted in nearly 20,000 requests from new customers, more than half of which included actual merchandise orders. *The Travels of Mary Ward* ran approximately one year, from 1936 to 1937.

Ellis' latest stint under Ward's sponsorship convinced KMBC to see her as much a dramatist, both writer and actor, as pitch lady. For a short time she returned to local broadcasting, conducting human interest interviews and talks with housewives, county agents, and local agriculture leaders. Concurrently she turned to creating her most enduring vehicle, a program called *Caroline's Golden Store*. Building on the successful formula utilized in *Joanne's Fashion Flashes* and *The Travels of Mary Ward*, *Caroline's Golden Store* deftly wove commercials into the scripts, much in the manner perfected by writer Don Quinn on the classic radio comedy *Fibber McGee and Molly*. Ellis again played the namesake lead role, Caroline, who ran a general store in a non-descript small town. She was described as a "friend to everyone" and involved herself in the day-to-day dramas of friends, neighbors, and customers. Similar to the tact used with Mary Ward, the Golden Store sold goods marketed by its sponsor General Mills.

General Mills initially had doubts. The long-winded introductory and closing commercials found on all the daily serials was dispensed with in Ellis' proposal, replaced by advertising that was expertly weaved into the program itself. Nevertheless, Ellis' record was hard to ignore and executives gave it the green light for a six-month test run. Beginning August 15, 1938, *Caroline's Golden Store* was broadcast from Des Moines' WHO. Why WHO was chosen as the originating station and not KMBC is not explained in archival documents. Perhaps it more readily reached General Mills' target audience than did the more southern and western KMBC.

The series, which aired every weekday from 11:15 to 11:30, was directed by Fran Heyser, actor and dramatic coach who also was a long-time KMBC employee. *The Golden Store's* Des Moines cast included Cliff Carl, Sarabeth Barger, Maxine Gibson, Bill Kilmer, Gwen Anderson, Shari Morning, and Jack Smith, all of whom had appeared on prior WHO productions. None of these players are known to have left a notable legacy in radio history though there was a singer by the name of Jack Smith who had regular radio jobs who may or may not have been the same Jack Smith who worked the Golden Store. For six months, until February 10, 1939, *Caroline's Golden Store* entertained daytime listeners.

Satisfied with the test run General Mills bought time on NBC Red beginning June 5, 1939 and moved the program to NBC's Chicago station. The WHO supporting cast may or may not have followed. Historian John Dunning identifies Joan

Kay, Jack Brinkley, Virginia Jones, Frank Behrens, and announcer Franklyn MacCormack as featured players on the network run. Ellis' program aired for thirteen weeks over NBC before General Mills moved it to CBS beginning August 15. The program continued to originate from Chicago until leaving the air on July 9, 1940, a network run of thirteen months. Caroline Ellis had proven her writing chops by this time and was given the opportunity to write the entire series. Notably, this included the advertising copy and not just the dramatic text. General Mills provided any necessary information regarding company products and their legal department would check the final script before broadcasting but Ellis laid claim to being the show's creative force. Radio soap opera expert Jim Cox has identified *Caroline's Golden Store* as one of the many series “created, adapted, supervised, augmented, or directly influenced” by the first couple of radio serials, Frank and Anne Hummert. KMBC documentation does not reveal this link so any part the Hummert's may have played in the series is conjecture at this point.

After two years in Des Moines and then Chicago, Caroline Ellis returned to Kansas City and KMBC. Arthur Church, Jr. recalled that Ellis continued to be on the KMBC payroll even though she was not based in Kansas City. (A. Church, Jr., personal communication, September 6, 2010). If accurate this would be a similar arrangement that the Texas Rangers had who were salaried KMBC employees though they were, by 1940, based out of Southern California. In 1941 Ellis began preparing a new show to pitch to national advertisers. Church set aside a fifteen-minute time slot Monday through Saturday for Ellis to work out her new premise entitled *The Happy Homemaker*. In a turn from the formula that had proven so successful thus far, Ellis planned to set aside storylines and dramatic action and talk directly to her devoted listeners. The program was billed as “a quarter-hour of conversation – some news, some philosophy” and commentary on areas of interest to her female audience. She was not adverse to interviewing guests or reading from a short story that caught her eye.

With the country at war, such homemaking broadcasts were more pertinent than ever. While she strove to be “inspirational,” “thought-provoking,” and “entertaining,” Ellis knew that the essence of her success was her relevance to middle-America housewives. Tips to extend the life of household appliances and tools and strategies to conserve energy and fuel were important to women on tight budgets with husbands and sons fighting overseas. Her contributions to the war effort via daily broadcasts were recognized on January 6, 1943 when it was announced that KMBC had received a Variety Showmanagement Award for its broadcasting work in support of the armed forces. The station specifically singled Ellis out as an important contributor to winning the honor.

During the early years of *The Happy Home*, between 1941 and 1944, Ellis achieved significant ratings milestones. For a time she pulled larger audiences in the Kansas City market than *The Story of Mary Marlin*, a daily serial about an Iowa housewife who becomes a United States Senator. Marlin kept her audience coming back every day for eighteen years.

More impressive was a period during which Ellis was scheduled against sudsy queen *Ma Perkins*, played by Virginia Payne for 27 years, from 1933 to 1960, and again came out on top in the Kansas City ratings. The city's listeners clearly loved their hometown homemaker. Eventually *The Happy Home* was moved to an 8:30 a.m. spot which was devoid of such stiff competition. In that slot Ellis received an impressive 28% audience share, 10% higher than her closest competitor.

Despite such impressive numbers, records don't indicate that Church was ever able to find a coast-to-coast sponsor for the tips and hints program. Various sponsorship rates were put in place to appeal to a wider array of potential advertisers. Once-a-week sponsorship cost 83\$ per week, 48\$ for time and 35\$ for talent. A three-a-week plan cost \$234.60, \$129.60 for time and \$105 for talent. Interestingly, it apparently was not available for daily sponsorship indicating either that Ellis no longer had six days on the air as she did when *The Happy Home* started or Church, for some reason, did not want a daily sponsor. To entice buyers he even guaranteed that the program was safe from network time encroachment. Ellis' *Happy Home* aired late into the 1940s.

While broadcasting her daily women's show Caroline Ellis was also involved with a non-commercial children's production called *The Magic Book*, the content of which is unclear. Trained to be a school teacher, Arthur Church valued educational programming and frequently promoted the educational aspects of his station's dramatic productions. Ellis was still associated with *The Magic Book* in 1953 as Church's years as head of KMBC were coming to an end. She was copied on a memorandum from June, 1953, summarizing the latest season of *Radio Schoolhouse*, of which *The Magic Book* was a part.

Not much is known of this effort which debuted in 1945 though at least one episode has survived. Though radio-based education never matched the ambitions envisioned by early radio pioneers, this particular effort – though very local – should be considered a success. Survey results of the 1952 – 1953 season indicate a minimum regular listenership of 3,866 classrooms and over 110,000 students. Interestingly, *The Magic Book* with which Ellis was associated, was broadcast every Thursday and claimed the highest audience at nearly 32,000 student listeners in a given week.

Despite the success Caroline Ellis experienced over her two decades on the air she didn't achieve everything she wanted. In the mid-1940s after her taste of national exposure with *Caroline's Golden Store*, she created at least three straight serials that strayed from the homemaking themes on which her reputation had been built. There's no evidence, however, that any of them ever had a significant run on the air. The series were *River to the Sea*, *The Marsh Family*, and *Wide Horizons*. Of the three *River to the Sea* is the most well documented due to a three-page treatment preserved from the era and the only one with evidence to suggest it was actually broadcast.

As had become Ellis' custom, the lead character in *River to the Sea* was named Caroline and must be seen as a semi-autobiographical character. Caroline was described as a widower who had been left a bit of money by her deceased

husband but was at a point where she had to begin producing some income. Therefore she bought a small building in Arden where she became the proprietor of a neighborhood food shop. Getting rich was, of course, not important; Being a good friend and neighbor was all that mattered.

Other characters included Uncle Jim Bentley, a father figure to Caroline and Mrs. Crowley (perhaps in homage to former employer Crowley, Milner and Co.?) was Caroline's housekeeper. Caroline apparently was the matriarch of the town, as serial heroines were apt to be and the 25-year-old Jane, an orphan taken in by Caroline served as the focal point for inevitable danger and unending travails. There were numerous stock good guys and bad guys as well as the two African-American characters, Sam and Magnolia, who provided the comedy but “stand by their 'white folks.’”

The program outline, which is undated, includes two clues that at a minimum a test run of the series was aired. In the description of Uncle Jim Bentley it is noted that “scenes where he takes her [Caroline] to task have proved to be most popular to broadcast.” In Mrs. Crowley's overview it is mentioned that she is rearing the two children of her “good for nothing” son but that they “have never been brought into the broadcast.”

Caroline Ellis' radio career was both typical of what was generally available to women at the time and yet atypical as well. For two decades her programs rarely moved outside of the homemaker and quasi-women's serial format and her sponsors frequently were producers of household goods of interest to a female audience. In addition to the aforementioned General Mills, Caroline Ellis' sponsors over the years included Celanese Corporation of America (fabrics), Trimz Ready-Pasted Wallpapers, The Mentholatum Company (household health goods), Periodical Publishers' National Association, The Hollanderizing Company (fur cleaning), and Robert Shaw Oven Heat Control. Yet she had a level of control over her work, from its inception through creation to production that few women could claim. Neither was Ellis the first to have such control nor did she yield the most power of the small circle of successful radio women, but that she achieved as much from a small market base with the backing of a relatively small network station is worth noting and remembering. Ellis presumably died May 17, 1963, using the dates offered by Sayles and nearly 50 years later still lacks the attention in radio histories given to men and women who accomplished much less.

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