

Oil Company Says Good-bye To Radio After 29 Years

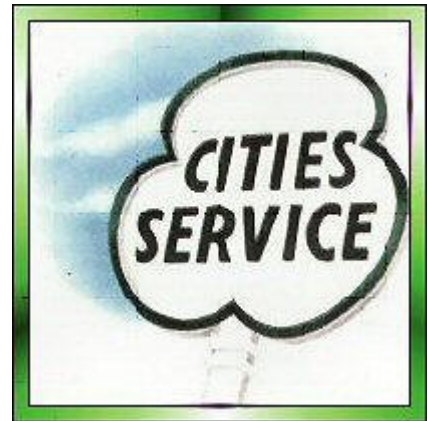
“Wherever you drive, whatever you are driving,
you’re always welcome at the
green and white *Cities Service* sign.”

---Todd Russell

Lincoln, Me. (DG)—

The 1950’s was a sad decade for the loyal listeners of radio’s golden age. During this time, there were a lot of programs, stars, and sponsors who were leaving the airwaves. While some programs, stars, and sponsors were moving on to television, others were leaving the air for good. To add to the gloom of what you have read so far, this article is about a longtime radio sponsor who was also going off the air.

On Monday, January 16, 1956, the ***CITIES SERVICE BAND OF AMERICA*** aired its final broadcast. As the name implied, this half hour program consisted of lively band music conducted by Paul La Valle. When this broadcast ended, it also ended ***Cities Service*** sponsorship of radio that almost went back to the very beginning of network radio.



Over its 29-year span on the air, the ***Cities Service*** radio program was basically the same. It was on the air for its entire run on **NBC’s Red Network** (later renamed **NBC**) and (for the most part) was presented on Friday evening at 8 PM. The only differences were the type of music played and the program’s name.

It all started on Friday, February 18, 1927 with the debut of ***THE CITIES SERVICE ORCHESTRA***. It was an hour-long program of lively brass band music. With direct selling not allowed at this time, the only advertising ***Cities Service*** could do was to add its name to the program and the orchestra playing on it.

As with most radio programs, ***THE CITIES SERVICE ORCHESTRA*** went through some minor changes and tweaks to better itself. The program hit its stride in 1930 when a change in music went from a lively brass band to concert style music with strings. To go along with the concert music, Jessica Dragonette was the program’s featured singer. With a touch of elegance, Ms. Dragonette, the orchestra members, conductor Rosario Bourdon; and M.C. Ford Bond were all formally attired like they would be if they were performing in an actual concert. Since the theme was concert music, the final tweak was a change of the program’s name to ***THE CITIES SERVICE CONCERT****.

The changes of the program had some huge dividends. It had an impressive 23.0 **C.A.B. Rating** (Co-

Operative Analysis of Broadcasting) during the 1930-1931 season. That number was good for a 10th place tie with **NBC(Red's) A&P GYPSIES** and **NBC(Blue's) ARMOUR PROGRAM** (with Phil Baker) among the season's highest rated radio programs.** A key reason for the program's popularity was Ms. Dragonette, who had a singing voice the listeners couldn't ever forget.



Jessica Dragonette

According to different books on old time radio, Ms. Dragonette was considered to be radio's first superstar. This small, slender woman with the angel-like singing voice brought a certain charm to the program. Her solo performances and duets with singer Frank Parker were memorable to the listeners who had the good fortune to hear them.

The changes worked out well for **THE CITIES SERVICE CONCERT**, but it wasn't forever. With the program ratings declining during the mid 1930's, a controversial and unpopular change was made--- the departure of Jessica Dragonette from the program. The controversy behind her leaving made headlines. Not surprising, there were also testy listeners who had some hostile feelings for both **NBC** and **Cities Service**--- and let them know about it with irate phone calls and unflattering letters. Fortunately for the network and sponsor, they weathered the ugly storm. Lucille Manners took over as the featured singer, and the program didn't skip a beat.

As for Ms. Dragonette, she was "**on again, off again**" from the time she left the **Cities Service** program until she appeared regularly on **Pet Milk's SATURDAY NIGHT SERENADE** on the **Columbia Network**. Why I mention this is because of the polls **Radio Guide** magazine conducted each radio season. The magazine asked its readers (who were also radio listeners I assume) to vote for their favorite radio stars. On a consistent basis, Ms. Dragonette was listed among the most popular--- even during those times she wasn't on radio on a regular basis. In her book *Faith Is A Song*, Ms. Dragonette mentioned her fans' support meant a lot to her. With what I have read in her book and in different radio magazines, Ms. Dragonette meant a lot to the listeners as well.

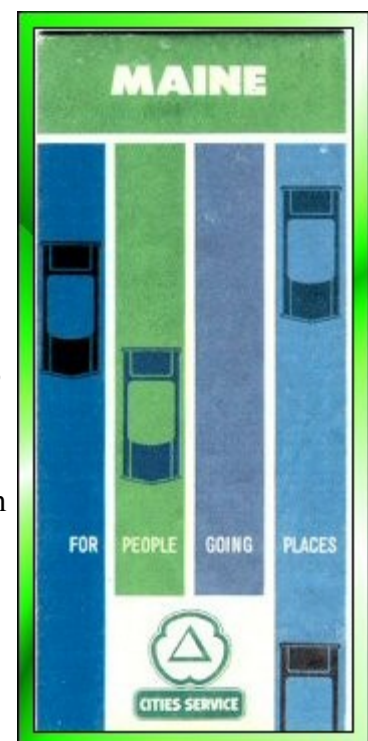
THE CITIES SERVICE CONCERT maintained mediocre, but steady ratings after Ms. Dragonette left the program. In 1940, the program's length was cut back to 30 minutes instead of a full hour, and Dr. Frank Black conducted the **Cities Service Orchestra**. The program continued for another 4 years. Despite the quality music from the orchestra and singing by Ms. Manners, it looked like the glory days of the concert format were over and done with.

In 1944, there were some noticeable changes made. The program's name was changed to **HIGHWAYS IN MELODY**, and Paul LaValle took over the conducting duties. The familiar concert style of music was changed to lively marching band music that would eventually carry over into **THE CITIES SERVICE BAND OF AMERICA**, which finished out the run.

At this point, I have crammed 29 years of the **Cities Service** radio program into a few paragraphs. Now, it's time to talk about **Cities Service** itself--- or in the case of the enclosed commercial, let Todd Russell talk about it as he did on the final **CITIES SERVICE BAND OF AMERICA** broadcast



The oil company with the triangle logo had filling stations throughout the



East and Midwest. I know *Cities Service Koolmotor* was a name for its gasoline at one time, but I'm not sure if it was the name for the company's regular or Ethyl gas. During the 1950's and early 1960's, *Milemaster* (in the white and green pump) was *Cities Service's* regular gasoline, and *5D* (a.k.a. *Super 5D* in the white and red pump) was the name of its premium. When super premium gasoline was popular, *Cities Service* also made *100 Plus* (in the white and yellow pump). It goes without saying that there were friendly people at every *Cities Service* station to tend to the motorist's needs from pumping gasoline to providing road maps.

9 years after *Cities Service* said good-bye to radio, it was saying good-bye--- **period!** The familiar green and white *Cities Service* colors were changed to a dynamic color scheme of maroon, red, and orange. With the color changes, the name was also changed to *Citgo*.

29 years is a long time. *Cities Service* sponsorship on the **NBC Radio Network** was one of the longest stints of the golden age. From the grace and elegance of Jessica Dragonette to the marching music of the *Cities Service Band Of America*, *Cities Service* on radio meant good music for the whole family.

***- The *CITIES SERVICE CONCERT* program might also be known as *CITIES SERVICE CONCERTS*. I have seen the program printed both ways in radio magazines.**

**** - The 1930-1931 radio season was the first time a ratings system was used for monitoring the popularity of radio programs.**