

WLS Listeners, Please 'Stand By!'

Part I: In the 1930s, the Chicago Powerhouse Wooed Listeners Both on the Airwaves and in Print

By Andrew Ooms

As someone interested in radio programming and radio station history, especially that related to Chicago, I recently was an appreciative recipient of a great gift. At a yard sale in Payson, Arizona, a friend of mine bought a box of magazines published by Chicago radio station WLS more than 70 years ago.

The magazine was titled *Stand By*, published weekly and mailed to subscribers for \$1 per year. Individual copies were a nickel. My friend paid \$5 for the magazines and gave them to me. The copies I now have were originally mailed to an individual in Farmersburg, Indiana. I have more than 160 issues dating from February 1935 to February 1938, **Photos A, B, and C**.

Some context may help here, although likely redundant for some *Popular Communications* readers: WLS in the 1930s, as now, broadcasted at the maximum allowable power for United States AM stations — 50,000 watts. Back then, WLS was at 870 on the dial. After a North American broadcasters' agreement reached in the 1940s, WLS moved to its current position of 890 kilohertz.

Back in the Day . . .

WLS was operated by Sears-Roebuck Co. shortly after its inception in 1924, and the company was happy to encourage the understanding that WLS referred to *World's Largest Store*. The Federal government wasn't — and isn't — involved in station slogans or determinations as to what the call letters stand for. In fact, WBBX, WES, and WJR (subsequently assigned to Detroit) were considered as call letters for the Chicago station. But the final decision was WLS.

By the 1930's, Sears Roebuck had sold the station to *The Prairie Farmer* magazine, **Photo D**, an immensely successful and respected farm publication circulated throughout the Midwestern states.

"The magazine entertained a fabulously successful combination of city-dwelling, regional, and somewhat isolated and distant rural listeners . . ."

WLS' programming was thoroughly consistent with the company brand, happily accepting its urban audience, many of whom had moved to the city from the farm not too long before. But the station really emphasized its pastoral outreach during an era when rural America did not have nearly the access to mainstream media and culture it does now.

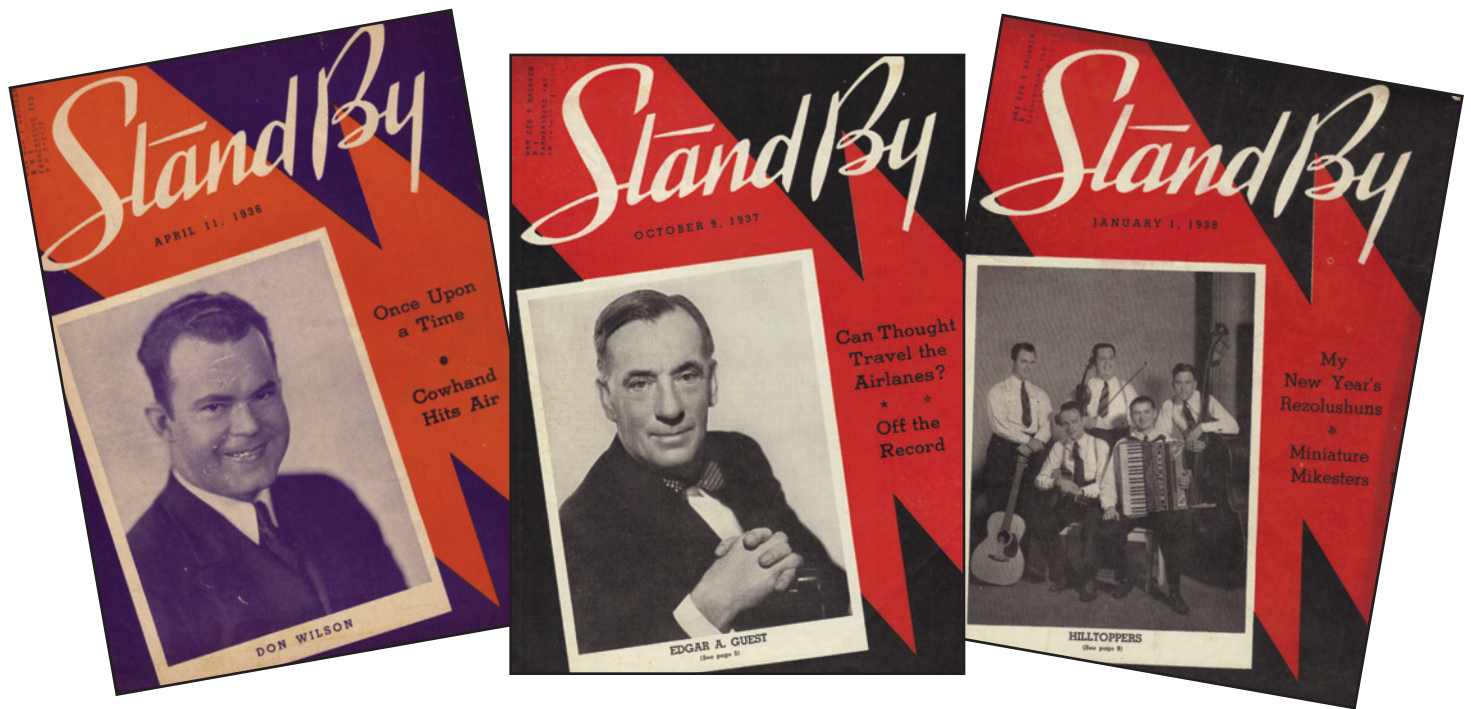
So what did the American farm family do during its evening leisure hours before the 1920's? It is a little hard for us

to imagine a time when radio and television broadcasting was non-existent, and newspapers were hard to get on a timely basis for many rural readers. Rural evenings were then spent playing games, making music and listening to family members make music, reading, and chatting when guests visited. By today's standards, bedtime was much earlier.

Try to imagine the growing excitement created by the fantastic new pastime of radio listening. What started as most-



Wireless Fascination: What started as mostly younger and middle-aged males who experimented with non-user-friendly crystal sets, earphones, and erratic programming schedules — *early radio geeks* — became, by 1930, a huge audience of all ages, no longer predominately male. (Courtesy of Wikimedia Commons)



Photos A, B, C. The weekly arrival of WLS's *Stand By* magazine was highly anticipated by the Chicago station's legion of listeners, who were never disappointed. Shown here are, from left, the April 11, 1936; October 9, 1937; and January 1, 1938 editions. (Courtesy of Andrew Ooms)

ly younger and middle-aged males who experimented with non-user-friendly crystal sets, earphones, and erratic programming schedules — *early radio geeks* — became, by 1930, a huge audience of all ages, no longer predominately male. They listened to the magic of information and entertainment every day and night from local and long-distance sources.

WLS Enlists Listeners As Partners

Stand By entered the picture as *The Prairie Farmer* solidified listener loyalty by making its listeners part of the growing WLS family of staff and audience.

The magazine contributed to a fabulously successful combination of city-dwelling, regional, and somewhat isolated and distant rural listeners with extremely popular country music programming, information services of unlimited variety, and an emphasis on a human, folksy, and charismatic staff.

WLS was not the only station to utilize a magazine to emphasize being part of the listener's family and probably not the only Chicago station to do so. But the essence and evidence of WLS' success is captured in issues of *Stand By*.

The magazine began in 1935 with 16 pages and grew to 20 pages within a few months. It was printed on cheap paper, identical to that used by comic books back then. The only color used at that time was on the cover, consisting of a solid color background framing a black and white photo of a station personality.

Broad Scope of Content

The magazine's content covered an extensive landscape including recipes, sewing patterns, dress and hat sketches, and other homemaker hints pages with regular writers.

Several folksy comment columns were included, as well. Some of them were humorous, some personality oriented, and some describing various station operations matters.



Photo D. The WLS Radio website gives details about the station's ownership transfer from Sears-Roebuck Co. to *The Prairie Farmer* magazine in 1928, <<http://bit.ly/NUw142>>. (Internet screen grab)

Many poignant Depression-era items appeared in *Stand By*. Descriptions of street urchins trying to sell shoelaces or shoe shines even after dark and in the winter, and of adults wandering the streets looking for work, and stories of listeners in dire need of basics for their families were not uncommon in the magazine.

An enduring picture was that of a row of 30-or-more unemployed adult men waiting at the elevated and subway exit stairs for the newspapers that riders gave to them after having been read on their way to work.

Personal items about station staff, musicians, announcers, and technicians were published each week. Staff marriages and births