

Maine History

Volume 45
Number 3 *Maine Culture, High and Low*

Article 5

12-1-2010

The Hillbillies of Maine: Rural Communities, Radio, and Country Music Performers

Erica Risberg

Follow this and additional works at: <https://digitalcommons.library.umaine.edu/mainehistoryjournal>



Part of the [Broadcast and Video Studies Commons](#), [Communication Technology and New Media Commons](#), [Cultural History Commons](#), and the [United States History Commons](#)

Recommended Citation

Risberg, Erica. "The Hillbillies of Maine: Rural Communities, Radio, and Country Music Performers." *Maine History* 45, 3 (2010): 281-290. <https://digitalcommons.library.umaine.edu/mainehistoryjournal/vol45/iss3/5>

This Article is brought to you for free and open access by DigitalCommons@UMaine. It has been accepted for inclusion in Maine History by an authorized administrator of DigitalCommons@UMaine. For more information, please contact um.library.technical.services@maine.edu.

THE HILLBILLIES OF MAINE: RURAL COMMUNITIES, RADIO, AND COUNTRY MUSIC PERFORMERS

BY ERICA RISBERG

During the first third of the twentieth century, the United States underwent profound social, technological, and economic changes that fundamentally altered rural society. This shift created a divide between rural and urban dwellers, and by the 1930s, country people were developing their own cultural expressions, often reflecting the unique folkways of various regions — the South, Appalachia, the Ozark Plateau, the rural West. One such manifestation of country culture was old-time, or country-western music — also known as hillbilly music. At the time, radio broadcasting was at an experimental stage in reaching an American audience. Station WLBZ in Bangor covered a broad demographic of predominantly rural and urban communities, and until 1938, the station was affiliated with the Columbia Broadcasting System which provided a flexible schedule for station programming. In an effort to garner a large audience, WLBZ presented a broad range of musical genres, one of which was country-western music. Erica Risberg received her Ph.D. from the University of Maine in 2006. Her interest in radio broadcasting stemmed from her research on Maine in the 1930s. She is the owner of Museum Podcasts, which creates 5-minute segments of audio clips that tie in with museum exhibits to bolster the online presence of museums. She is also a voiceover artist. She divides her time between Washington State and Connecticut.

THE LINKS between local radio stations and their listening audience are illusive, but the music tastes and preferences of local audiences do seem to affect radio programming. A small radio station in the Bangor area provides one way of looking at this connection in the early stages of radio programming in the 1930s. Oral histories that University of Maine folklorist Edward D. Ives conducted with station employees and performers, along with a survey by the University of Maine's Cooperative Extension in 1938 and radio logs from Radio Station WLBZ, provide a window into the relationship between broadcast-



Reid Hand, the MC at the Auto Rest Park in Carmel, sways to the sounds of country music in a live performance for Radio Station WLBZ in Bangor. Although gauging popular taste is difficult, indications suggest the widespread appeal of hillbilly music in rural Maine – indications that include the smile on Reid Hand’s face. “Hillbilly” music developed in the rural Southeast and came to Maine in the 1930s as rural people purchased radios. Photo courtesy of the Maine Folklife Center, University of Maine.

ing and audience, particularly in the genre of hillbilly music, which was popular in central Maine in the 1930s.

The term “hillbilly” conjures images of people living in backward, rural areas of the country. Its associations represent part of a larger tension between urban life and rural culture in the early twentieth century, as the term was used with both disdain and pride, depending on the user. It was also a style of music. “Hillbilly,” or “old-time” country music developed in southeastern rural sections of the United States. It relied heavily on fiddling, and while it developed mostly in the South, it was performed and appreciated in rural communities throughout the Northeast and Midwest as well.

In his *Country Music U.S.A.*, Bill Malone comments that “the instrument most favored by rural folk, and for a long time virtually the defin-

ing instrument of county music, was the fiddle.”¹ The fiddle music, reels, and square dances imported from England, Scotland, and Ireland into eighteenth-century Appalachia were adapted to string bands in the nineteenth century and performed throughout the South. Like the South, Maine was predominantly rural in the early 1900s, and fiddle music performed in local grange and dance halls was inspired by southern and Appalachian hillbilly sounds. Fiddles produce a lively dance rhythm, and like the accompanying guitar and banjo, they were relatively cheap and very portable. Techniques were passed from generation to generation, so that almost every locale, even the most rural, could find a few good fiddle players gathered together into a band. Fiddling became a major source of entertainment for rural dwellers all across the United States. Cherry Noble Frechette, a Maine musician from the town of Norway, stated that her grandfather, Mellie Dunham, performed at countless dances, competed in statewide fiddling contests, and recorded 78-rpm records in the 1920s, which sold well across the state.²

Hillbilly music was well adapted to Maine’s economy and its culture. At the turn of the century, Maine relied heavily on extracting and semi-processing natural resources like lumber, slate, granite, or fish. While factory towns like Lewiston, Biddeford, and Old Town dominated their respective economic regions, much of the state was comprised of small towns heavily dependent on a single industry — a saw mill, paper mill, tannery, quarry, or fishing wharf. Given the marginality of many of these industries — and the marginality of the farms that anchored so many Mainers to the land — rural people often balanced their income by combining farming, lumbering, or another rural pursuit over the course of the year.

Between 1890 and 1930, rural Maine underwent some fundamental changes. Industries that provided the foundation for Maine’s rural economy in the nineteenth century — sardine canning, shoemaking, woolens, lumber, granite quarrying — were stressed by changing markets, resource depletion, or technological obsolescence. In the 1880s and 1890s, electric companies brought street cars and hydro-based electricity to the cities and surrounding communities, and as factories and mills adapted to the new source of energy and grew more efficient, they reduced their workforce. Railroads further altered the landscape by eliminating the market for community-based producers and merchants like blacksmiths, farm-equipment suppliers, and grist millers. These new technologies also affected the state’s demographics. Between 1890 and 1930, many rural and village dwellers left their communities for cities like Lewiston, Bangor, and Portland, while those who stayed behind eked

by on multiple jobs and day labor.³ To maintain their sense of community amidst this tumult, rural Mainers gathered at grange and dance halls, listened to fiddlers perform for them, and struggled to uphold their traditions. This form of public entertainment helped rural communities maintain a sense of stability as changes rapidly altered the landscape around them.

It was in this changing social climate that Radio Station W1EE (later WLBZ) began broadcasting in 1926. Originally an amateur station, it transmitted signals from Dover-Foxcroft, with 250 watts of power, broadcasting for a half day and relying exclusively on local talent for programming. Shortly thereafter, WLBZ became a commercial station, and in 1928 it moved to Bangor. In 1930, it affiliated with the Columbia Broadcasting System (CBS) and reduced its local program output. By then, the station had increased its signal to 1,000 watts, which spread the broadcast to a larger listening audience.⁴

The station broadcast through central, eastern, and northern Maine in fifteen or thirty minute segments, with two types of programming: sponsored and sustaining. Sponsored programs were paid for by local, regional, or national companies that used their air time to sell products to listeners. Sponsors were a major source of revenue. Sustaining programming did not have a sponsor; the station paid for the air time. In the early years of broadcasting, most local programming was sustained. The affiliation with CBS enabled WLBZ to adapt its programming decisions to local tastes, since CBS allowed its affiliates more flexibility with schedules. In 1938, however, the station affiliated with the National Broadcasting Corporation (NBC). The financial arrangement between the two networks differed greatly: CBS essentially paid affiliates to broadcast network programs during prime time, whereas NBC penalized affiliates that did not.⁵ NBC, in short, demanded more national programming.

During the CBS years, WLBZ broadcast locally even during prime time, and even despite the financial incentive to broadcast the network lineup during the NBC years, the station reserved time for local talent. The station frequently held auditions for performers, and musicians contacted the station from as far away as North Carolina to try out for a slot in the local programming time. Selected groups would perform live and have their talents broadcast throughout central and northern Maine. The station did not compensate these musicians, but the broadcast helped them book performances in local dance halls and granges. In return, the popular bands bolstered WLBZ's audience and provided it

with musicians that performed hillbilly or country-western music.

Thompson Guernsey, the owner of WLBZ, encouraged station employees to seek out a wide array of musical genres. He recognized that local programming had been a staple of the station's earlier years, and he believed that responding to listener tastes would deepen and broaden the station's listener base. Station manager Irving Hunter stated that "the idea was to get as many listeners as you possibly could, to get them to listen to your station. And the secret to that was to play what they wanted to hear." Thus the station broadcast hillbilly singers on a sustaining basis. Hunter commented that if the performers could not find a sponsor, "they were not dropped — we wanted to get as much variety in programming as we could get. It sounds very corny, but we wanted to broadcast what the people wanted to hear."⁶

Two questions arise from Hunter's statement: first, how did people listen, and second, what did they want to hear? In 1924, according to the Sears catalog, radio models available to consumers were battery-operated, and therefore people in country homes without electricity could listen to the radio. The cost of a radio, though, was approximately \$100 per unit with an additional \$20 for batteries, which may have been prohibitive for many, since in the 1920s the national average annual income was about \$1,200. Sears offered components to those who wished to build their own sets, and this was clearly a cheaper alternative. As consumer demand rose over the 1920s, production increased and the price dropped to about \$27 in 1930. By then, consumers could purchase either consoles or smaller, more portable units known as cathedrals, and wired models were available to those in areas served by electricity. Even then, however, rural dwellers typically had less disposable income than their urban counterparts, and limited access to electricity curtailed their options. Despite these disparities, rural dwellers purchased radios at a level that suggests they were an important part of rural culture. The manuscript census from 1930 included a column for radio ownership, and a sampling of the census showed that 52 percent of families from Deer Isle, 26 percent from Cherryfield, 44 percent from East Millinocket, 31 percent from Caribou, and 40 percent from Unity owned radios.⁷ Edmund deS. Brunner, a sociologist affiliated with the Radio Institute of the Audible Arts in New York, commented that radio programs generally had "greater values for rural people than for others" and ranked them along with the telephone, automobile and rural free delivery as agents in "banishing the physical and cultural isolation to which rural people of a few decades ago were inevitably subjected."⁸

Given the number of radios in rural Maine in 1930, WLBZ was very likely responding at least in part to rural tastes by sustaining hillbilly music in their programming. Rural Mainers expressed their listening preferences to the station primarily through letters. Irving Hunter reflected that musicians received requests from listeners and based their live performances on these requests. "The minute they got on the station, they'd get requests. People would write in, 'oh my favorite number is so and so, could you possibly do this?' We got a tremendous amount of mail." Reid Hand, a performer and local MC, stated that hillbilly performers also drew large crowds on Friday and Sunday nights at the Auto Rest Park, a local amusement park in Carmel where WLBZ broadcast live performances.

Letters from listeners to the station have long since been destroyed, but the University of Maine Cooperative Extension Service offers further documentation of rural listener preferences. In May 1938, the Extension Service published a report on rural radio listening that included several tables indicating preferences for various stations and programming content. The Extension service interviewed 2,348 women living on Maine farms and in rural communities in Aroostook, Hancock, Penobscot, Piscataquis, and Washington Counties. The survey asked listeners about a variety of program genres. The Extension also produced their own talks and a five-minute farm news program which were broadcast on WLBZ. They were met with little interest by the respondents. While the survey did not ask about specific shows, it did ask about the genres. Approximately 7 percent of the respondents commented specifically on musical programs, stating that they wanted less jazz and swing music, and more "good music" — old time or hillbilly music. Two of the comments were: "too much jazz and too many blues singers" and "I don't like most of the music and much of the singing if such noise we hear can be called such." While the survey represents a small percentage of listeners in the state, it does provide some insight into what rural Mainers wanted from radio programming. The survey indicated that they wanted shows with old-time music, meal planning on moderate budgets, fewer crop reports, information about their fellow housewives, and more educational programming and book readings. They also wanted shows that provided practical skill applications, such as growing plants, preparing fowl for baking, and stain removal. In short, the survey suggested that rural listeners wanted programs that were educational and familiar.⁹ Historian Derek Valliant, who examined Wisconsin farmers' response to radio programming, recorded one respondent's comments: "give us some-

thing with a melody and you will git [sic] the applause. . . ‘Carry Me Back to Old Virginia’ . . . something with a tune — a melody — git someone with a fiddle, another with a banjo.”¹⁰ Like Wisconsin farmers, rural Mainers preferred “old-time music.” By writing letters, attending live performances, and responding to surveys, rural audiences made their music preferences clear; undoubtedly they affected station programming choices.

WLBZ met the rural preference for old-time, hillbilly music by opening up the studio for audiences during live performances and by broadcasting live from remote places where musicians played. WLBZ opened its studio so that audiences could watch and participate in live shows. In Bangor, Irving Hunter stated,

they came up all wide-eyed, and wanting to see a broadcast, and we had what we called an observation room behind a big, long spread of glass. They could sit there and watch and talk among themselves and not interfere with the programming going on the air because of the partition. So they could see everything and of course there was a loudspeaker there so they could hear it, but by the same token, they didn’t have to sit there quietly. And then we had programs in the big upstairs studio that would hold, I’m not sure, two, three hundred people, an auditorium kind of studio which they were part of — they’d clap, . . . and react vocally with screams, and this would be part of the broadcast.

An entertainer who performed well in this format was Gil Snow, who took on the stage names of Uncle Ezra and later Uncle Hezzy. Performing with two to three other musicians, Snow dressed like a down-east bumpkin with a goatee, overalls, and a frock; he talked with a down-east accent and played on a washboard with thimbles on his fingers. His popularity was measured by the letters he received through WLBZ — at one point some 20,000 in a single year. Uncle Hezzy hosted both a children’s show and an amateur hour on WLBZ. The station broadcast the amateur show on Wednesday nights during prime time, an indication of both its popularity and WLBZ’s commitment to rural listener preferences.

Several other hillbilly musicians performed on WLBZ during the 1930s. Musicians Ray and Ann Little, Hal Lone Pine and the Lone Pine Mountaineers, and Uncle Seth were among those from northern New England. They performed their own music as well as pieces written by others, like Hank Williams, and adapted to listener tastes and requests. Hal Lone Pine, originally a hillbilly singer from Lewiston and Old Town,



On Friday nights, WLBZ switched back and forth between national broadcasts and local performers, moving – although not seamlessly – from the fashionable ballrooms of New York to the Auto Rest Park in Carmel. Above, a group of locals dance at the Auto Rest Park, attesting to the popularity of country music in rural Maine. Photo courtesy of the Maine Folklife Center.

incorporated elements of country music such as yodeling and became a regional celebrity. Likewise, Ray and Ann Little performed at dances throughout the state and into New Brunswick, responding to audience preferences.¹¹

Throughout the 1930s, WLBZ continued to balance the preferences of their rural listeners with the CBS network programming. The radio logs from 1932 and 1935 indicate an ongoing commitment to local programs. On Friday nights, the station switched between CBS and local performers, broadcasting live in the first instance from fashionable New York hotels and in the second, from the Auto Rest Park in Carmel. Over the course of the decade, however, CBS developed prime-time programs that rivaled NBC's in quality and offered increasingly stronger financial incentives to broadcast national programs during prime time. WLBZ subsequently moved its local shows to non-prime time slots, like Wednesday nights before 8:00 and Sundays. In 1938, WLBZ switched its affiliation to NBC, and in 1942 it was purchased by Portland's WCSH.

Unlike CBS, NBC penalized its affiliates for broadcasting nonnetwork shows, especially during prime-time hours. The shift in programming was indicated in the radio logs. For example, by 1939, local hillbilly and country shows at WLBZ had decreased from 18.5 percent of programming time to slightly over 2 percent on Sundays. But given the affiliation with NBC and WCSH, it seems clear that these figures indicate WLBZ's programming decisions rather than listener preferences; as WLBZ turned away from local music shows, WABI, also located in Bangor, filled the ongoing audience market for hillbilly music in northern and central Maine.¹²

During its first decade of broadcasting, WLBZ, maintained a strong commitment to local performers and local audience taste. Station owner Thompson Guernsey chose to affiliate with CBS for financial reasons, but he also appreciated the network's flexibility with programming. He and his staff responded to listener comments, and they broadcast programs, often with live audiences, that listeners requested. Rural listeners actively participated in programming choices and responded with enthusiasm to hillbilly and old-time shows. It was only after affiliation with NBC and WCSH that WLBZ altered its programming of hillbilly performances and songs. Local programming continued to suffer over the course of the 1940s. NBC dominated programming throughout World War II, then pulled its popular programs off to populate the new medium of television. Radio stations languished as they struggled to fill hours of previously profitable programming. AM stations spent the rest of the 1940s with this new paradigm before settling into niche markets in the 1950s, such as sports and rock-n-roll. Country western music in Maine emerged again as an element of this niche market in the late 1950s and 1960s.

NOTES

1. Bill C. Malone, *Country Music USA* (second revised edition; Austin: University of Texas Press, 2002), p 17.
2. Interview with Cherry Noble Frechette by Greg Boardman, Norway, Maine, spring 1975, Maine Folklife Center, University of Maine, Orono. (Interviews hereafter mentioned are housed in the Folklife Center.)
3. *Biennial Census of Manufacturers for 1921 and 1923* (Washington, D.C.: GPO, 1924 and 1926); Bureau of Labor Statistics, *Report of Industrial and Labor Statistics, 1905-1930* (Augusta, Maine: State Printers, 1930); Public Utilities Commission, *Reports, 1925-1945* (Augusta, Maine); Hal Barron, *Mixed Harvest: The Second Great Transformation in the Rural North — 1879-1930* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1997).

4. See Ellie Thompson, *A History of Broadcasting in Maine: The First 50 Years* (Augusta: Maine Association of Broadcasters, 1990).
5. See Erik Barnouw, *A Tower in Babel: A History of Broadcasting in the United States*, vols. 1 and 2 (New York: Oxford University Press, 1966, 1968).
6. Irving Hunter interview by Edward D. Ives and Lisa Feldman, Orono and Bangor, Maine, Spring 1975.
7. *Fifteenth Census of the Population*, Maine, 1930 (Washington, D.C.: GPO, 1930).
8. Edmund deS. Brunner, *Radio and the Farmer: A Symposium on the Relation of Radio to Rural Life* (New York: Radio Institute of the Audible Arts, 1935), p. 5.
9. Extension Service of the College of Agriculture at the University of Maine, "Radio and Maine Homemakers: A Preliminary Survey of the Radio Listening Habits of 2,348 Women Living on Maine Farms and in Rural Communities" (Orono, Maine: Extension Service, 1938), p. 8; Reid Hand, interview by Edward D. Ives, Orono, Maine, Spring 1975, p. 8.
10. Derek Valliant, "Your Voice Came in Last Night, but I Thought It Sounded a Little Scared: Rural Radio Listening and 'Talking Back' during the Progressive Era in Wisconsin, 1920-1932," in *Radio Reader: Essays in the Cultural History of Radio*, edited by Michele Hilmes and Jason Loviglio (New York: Routledge, 2002), p. 63.
11. Hunter interview; Ray and Ann Little interview by Edward D. Ives, Orono, Maine, Spring 1975.
12. George Goynar interview by Erica Risberg, September 2003; WLBZ Station Records, 1931-1945, Fogler Library, Special Collections Division, University of Maine, Orono.