Fellowship Activity Report
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My research for the Fellowship program at the Berea College Sound Archive focused on the early history of radio and in particular country music programming. I was interested in exploring the connection between the expanding technology of the early to mid-twentieth century, its application to the perceived problems in Appalachia, and the great population shifts that occurred in the Southern mountains. I wanted to investigate how radio programming served the Appalachian populations in addition to facilitating, and at the same time attempted to curb, some of the migration out of the region.

In the course of my work I focused on a few major areas to help answer my questions. First was the role of the programs broadcast from the Renfro Valley music complex and in particular the commentary of John Lair. I made extensive use of radio recordings and program scripts, particularly for his Sunday morning show the *Renfro Valley Gatherin’*. This show was heavily scripted, overtly religious in nature, and offered unique insight into what Lair perceived about the world and the changing nature of his region. The show often followed common themes, one of which was the problem of individuals, particularly young men, leaving the Southern mountains.

Lair used the radio show and the traditional music of the area as a means by which to advocate for staying home on the farm and avoiding what he viewed as the great problems of urbanization and fast-paced twentieth century life. Listeners, young and old, proved receptive towards Lair’s views in addition to openly challenging them on occasion. The *Gatherin’*, in addition to Lair’s other programs, offered an opportunity for a dialogue to develop between Lair, urban, and rural listeners about the problems confronting the region in the era surrounding World War II.

Mail to the show was quite popular and Lair would use these letters as one means of building a theme for broadcast. Curiously, Lair’s admonitions about out-migration were almost universally directed at young men, who began leaving the region for urban destinations in larger numbers through the 1950s. Lair often reflected on his own experiences, particularly in Chicago and Cincinnati, as a means of convincing others to “stay on the farm.” At the same time that Lair was trying to prevent the population shifts the popularity of his programs, and others like, his was encouraging individuals to seek fame and fortune through music.

In addition, the vast radio network that developed in the late 1920s and into the early 1930s offered unique opportunities for the residents of Appalachia. Lair’s project was unique in that it existed within the Appalachian region, while in general in order to achieve radio fame one had to venture out of the mountains and more broadly out of the South. The music of Appalachia (occasionally misidentified and often generally labeled under the broad terms of folk, traditional, country, or the most problematic hillbilly) was extremely popular during this era and there was heavy demand among radio stations for both players and songs.

Early stations featured broadcast almost wholly live music and country music was the most requested by both urban and rural listeners. The popularity of the shows at Renfro Valley and of the Grand Ole Opry attest to this fact. The first era of pop-stars were born out of this time period in the likes of people like Bradley Kincaid. I used parts of the collection of listener mail to Kincaid during his hey-day as one means of assessing listener perception of country music. The letters to Kincaid hit on some universal
themes, one of which was the sincere desire to follow in his footsteps as the country-boy who made good.

While the persona of Kincaid and other players was somewhat exaggerated by those individuals, the sincerity of the listener mail indicates that people truly believed radio and music could be a potential ticket to success. Much of the mail to Kincaid was focused in this direction as listeners tried to get their own songs and poems played, recorded or published in attempts to make a profit or elicited Kincaid's help in alleviating some of the problems that many were experiencing.

John Lair's work was important in a similar way, as his cast was overtly billed as the "residents of a real community" in the hills of the Kentucky Mountains. Again, this was not necessarily true, but the life stories of individuals who achieved success on Renfro Valley and used it as a means to move on to other ventures and achieve greater fame. Thus radio served as an opportunity for aspiring musicians to leave the mountains in hopes of realizing success.

The Archives offered an extensive collection of oral histories relating to early country music players and the manner in which many moved about the country, particularly through the major radio stations of the Midwest, indicates the role radio played in facilitating migration. The Renfro Valley tent shows of the 1940s were integral in this regard as well, as the shows offered an opportunity for employment and a chance for many of the Appalachian region to see the broader United States. The SAA collection of photographs and interviews related to these individuals was extremely helpful in seeing how individuals used the tent show as a means of moving away from the region.

Radio attempted to provide support to the Southern Appalachians in direct ways as well. I made extensive use of material relating to the history of WHAS and oral histories involving the development of Mountain Listening Centers in the Eastern Kentucky region as a means of getting at this question. Radio was seen simultaneously as an entertainment, commercial, and educational venture and stations often varied in which approach to take.

WHAS was a leading station in testing the educational abilities of radio and this was reflected in the establishment of Mountain Listening Centers. This program was almost wholly the brainchild of Elmer Sulzer at the University of Kentucky and his efforts provided radios to communities in Eastern Kentucky. The station also partnered with the University of Kentucky to develop programs aimed at the mountain population.

While the results of these efforts were uneven, the program itself followed a long tradition of attempting to provide uplift to what was still seen as a very "backwards" region of the United States. The program was also a forerunner to the establishment of radio stations in the mountains, which further opened opportunities for residents to perform music or dabble in broadcasting itself and thus join the ever growing network of the mid-1900s radio community. The archive houses an excellent collection of recordings and transcripts relating to those who worked at, visited, and housed listening centers during the 1930s and 1940s.

The development of radio and its application to the needs of the Southern Appalachians was important to the overall way in which government and private interests continued the long pattern of uplift towards the region. In addition, the broad popularity of cultural aspects associated with the region, even if somewhat problematic, helped to facilitate and encourage movement about and out of the region as yet another part of the great migrations of the twentieth century.
In the short term, I plan on presenting work done in the Sound Archive at the 2012 Appalachian Studies Conference to be held in March. In the longer term, I see this work as part of doctoral research in the fields of radio, migration, urban, and Appalachian studies. The opportunity to work in Berea was an eye opening experience and was made much easier by the kindness and helpfulness of all the staff in the Southern Appalachian Archives.