Thanks to the generosity of the Berea College Appalachian Sound Archives Fellowship, I spent two intense months in the Special Collections reading room, Sound Archives listening room, microfilm collection, and stacks at Berea College’s Hutchins Library in February and May of 2011. I encountered a wealth of print and recorded treasures that opened and expanded my original proposal in ways that I couldn’t have imagined prior to the experience.

In brief, I applied for the fellowship with music on my mind—specifically the kind of roots music that grew to dominate radio broadcasts targeted at audiences in rural America until the 1950s—but I ended up focusing more than I could have expected on educational radio during that era. This is not surprising, given my background in education as well as in communication and the arts. And so it was that with the encouragement of archivists, I followed two rural radio trails: music and education. My decades of focus emerged as the 1920s through the 1940s.

I came to the archives expecting to dig into the historical audio record of musicians—more specifically, country entertainers who built careers on radio programs broadcast to rural listeners. I was originally especially interested in field recordings, the function of radio in rural life, and barn dance-type shows, those played to live audiences for radio broadcast in places such as Renfro Valley, Chicago, Louisiana and Nashville. My interest in music on early radio stemmed, in part, from the fact that I am a musician. But I also worked in radio, listened to radio on the farm where I grew up, and have a special interest in broadcast media. I came to Berea with a complete plan of what I wanted to research, and that included what I thought I might accomplish with what I expected to find. In other words, I thought I knew what I was doing.

Practice, however, is quite a different animal than is theory—as any experimenter, inventor, explorer or curious entrepreneur will tell you. I pride myself on being flexible when one or a quest, and I’m ashamed of myself when I remain too rigid for so long that an opportunity excuses itself from my presence. One never knows what might reveal itself unexpectedly. Missing an enticing trailhead is a sad, sad thing to do when traveling an unknown intellectual path. Having done this a few times in my stubborn youth, I have since grown into one who will not allow a preconceived notion to block or lure me from a greater truth, even if it means that arriving at a destination takes a bit longer.

So it was that after only a few first days in the wonderful womb that is the archives’ reading room, I ran into a piece of information completely new to me. It was the short-lived Listening Centers in rural Kentucky, and it rattled the window panes of my little proposal. I had to remind myself that a plan is only a way to get started on something big, after all.

Immediately, I wanted to know all about the Listening Centers—who developed the idea, who funded it, where, how, when, and so forth. This was not about entertainment at all. This was radio for educational purposes. Having stumbled across the studio for School of the Air when traveling in the Australian outback some years earlier, once I learned that a different version had been used in Kentucky some decades ago, I became further fascinated with radio broadcasting as “classroom.” Entertainment radio seemed suddenly passé.

Radio broadcasting and its history have been a deeply alluring interest for me since my childhood in rural Kentucky. Not only was I an avid listener all my life, I was also a reader on the topic, and I was an observer and amateur collector of stories about personal impressions of radio. My mother had to explain to me as a preschooler that there were no teeny-tiny musicians, actors and announcers...
inside our refrigerator-top radio, and she helped me to understand how radio broadcasts work. My grandmother, born in the Victorian era, had later told me of her delight as a youngster using headphones to listen in on a crystal set. My parents had spoken of having heard many of the classic radio music programs, dramas and comedies of the Golden Age. My childhood piano teacher had once told me that her family had been listening when Orson Wells put “War of the Worlds” on the air; when she and her sister felt panic, her father convinced them that the events depicted in the broadcast weren’t really happening, in spite of the brilliant and original (at that time) premise that the drama was news coverage. (Now, of course, we can see this type of Faux News charade every single day on television, but in 1938 it was shocking.) My father said he loved to listen to the Grand Ole Opry as a boy. My aunts and uncles had listened carefully to radio for news of WWII because they had friends and spouses and brothers who had gone off into those distant, troubled lands. In rural America, radio has been our connection to the world in so many ways.

I had loved radio so much as a youngster that my original major in college was Radio/TV/Film. Then life got in the way. During a necessary hiatus from my studies (a break lasting several years), I worked for radio stations and newspapers. After a few years, when I returned to school to finish my degree, I changed my major to English—but I added a R/TV/F “cousin,” Speech/Theatre, plus History as my revised academic minors. And I became a teacher. Later, I earned my master’s in journalism (my family published weekly newspapers). Media have always interested me.

In my bio, I nearly always include a statement about my work life being braided from three strands: education, communication and the arts. I have often engaged in activism to make things happen, as well. I constantly look for threads that can weave a web of meaning. Imagine my intense interest, then, when I ran, quite unexpectedly but with archivist Harry Rice’s guidance, into evidence of the long-forgotten rural Listening Centers. I can now admit that it thrilled and confused me. Apparently, there had been no book written about this short-lived phenomenon that brought radio to tiny communities in the mountains. I started immediately seeking more information, but it took at least two weeks more before I came to understand that my initial interest in country roots music and comedy available by radio to listeners in rural Kentucky were intimately tied to a broader scope and wider, more educational use for broadcasting. Print was involved, too. For me, the media themselves (to paraphrase Marshall McLuhan) were, in fact, the messages that tugged most insistently on my heart and mind.

I am still interested in rural roots music, of course, but the delivery of all types of programs and information to rural people began to take over my research focus. Music, in this context, receded. I finally realized what urged me to adjust the topic I came into the archives with: It was my lifelong interest in and practice of activism for community-building. When I learned about the Listening Centers, I was hooked. It seemed the perfect confluence of all my strands: education, communication and the arts, plus activism.

Under the kind and supportive tutelage of my primary mentor, Harry Rice (and with excellent help and guidance from Shannon Wilson, Jaime Bradley and John Bondurant), I found that I could give myself permission to shift focus from the research path I had predicted to include what it insisted on becoming. I pursued three paths for most of my time in the archives: 1) ways of presenting radio performers, both comic and musical; 2) the innovative Listening Centers; 3) the general image and function of radio in rural life before mid-20th Century. I couldn’t say during the time I was sifting through the archival materials what would eventually become of these pursuits. To his credit, Harry Rice trusted the process enough; based on his years of bearing witness to struggles like mine, to help me keep plowing and planting. I expect that Harry knew, with the faith of the gardener, that either something of intellectual value would grow from my diligence ... or else I would. He was right on both counts. And what scholar doesn’t appreciate that kind of generous guidance? This lifelong learner is here to tell you that I most assuredly did.
In my research, I found disappointment in the places where I expected to find joy. The rural "hayseed" stereotypes were (as they have always been for me) daunting, and I struggled with them. Conversely, I found joy where I wasn’t even looking. Life and scholarship are both mysteries. They don’t adjust to us. We must accommodate them.

The full extent of my time in the reading room occurred against a backdrop of personal turmoil for me. Health, home, art, business, betrayals, grief and loss—I was reaching the zenith of a set of troubles and circumstances, the extent and results of which even I couldn’t gauge, though I alone was living all of it at once. I was successful at being quiet about it. No one knew how upset I was. The only thing I could think to do during those weeks was to get into the archives as much as possible (which was never as much as I wanted), keep my head buried in its treasures, and allow the work and the potential for growth and healing to pull me through to the other side. Like other humans, I had previously experienced great tribulation, so I knew there was a chance that time would ease some of the pain and solve some of the puzzles. What was different this time, however, was that I was being hit with multiple life-altering changes simultaneously. "Overwhelming" is a term that comes to mind. "Overwhelming," in fact, is understatement. Because of this turmoil, shortly after the fellowship period ended I took an extended hiatus from all of my work, and I ended up moving out of the city, traveling the country, and eventually landing back in rural Kentucky where I belong.

I bring this up only to create an opportunity to both commend and thank the fellowship program leadership for patiently nurturing all of us, just as we come, just as we are during the short time we are there, even when they don’t know a single detail about our personal struggles. They approach us holistically and with patience, and that is something that I appreciate beyond words. The entire experience was and is quite emotional, although until this moment I have been private about it. Context can be everything. I often wonder how different my fellowship might have felt under less trying times. I imagine that my time in the program was all the more intense because of the intellectual escape it offered from the ferocity of the most difficult period I have known.

So, besides the entirely hidden personal journey, what is the professional value of my time as a researcher in the archives? Truth be told, there may never be a final answer to that question. The search was so rich that I expect I’ll never stop drawing on it. Inquiry is a powerful force. It self-perpetuates. And for that, we can rejoice.

I can report that some of what I uncovered is making itself known in the novel I am writing, but even more of it is present in two nonfiction projects that I have started. Ultimately, I want to write a book about the Listening Centers in rural Kentucky—I gathered mounds of information about the project and its principal organizers, even conducted a new interview during my fellowship. And I have several threads yet to follow in other archives, now that I know what I’m looking for. Additionally, I am working out a way to connect some of the other material I uncovered. I hope to link it to today’s Internet radio programming, which would take it from the beginning to the end of radio “broadcasting,” at least as we define it in the present day. And I have founded an online project (ArtEvokesArt.com) that encourages people to react creatively to posted works by creating work of their own, in any genre, in response to posted pieces. I have posted some writing from my fellowship’s final presentation there, in hopes of stimulating response to some of the research-based, cultural and technical ideas I have begun to set forth. I’ll also include this writing in the Listening Centers book as I write it.

Inspiration and possibility—when I sift through the evidence I collected, I find these positives. Considering the chaos of negatives that I was enduring at the time, these curious remains are the basis of hope. The respect I received, the gentle teaching, the service—these are perhaps the greatest gifts and lessons of all. Forgetting all the invaluable research I gathered and will continue to use for years and years to come, these human qualities by themselves, displayed by the archive staff, are examples to learn from and to pass on. The fellowship offers more, you see, than information alone. It was the worst
of times. But the reading room was the best of oases, the fellowship the best of experiences. And I will
dine on that in a variety of ways for the rest of my life.