



The Early Years of Talk Radio: WJAG, Norfolk, Nebraska

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Article Summary: Political talk dominates the AM airwaves today, but in 1946 and 1947, Norfolk station WJAG found its broadcast license in jeopardy due to controversial on-air commentary.

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Names: Eugene Huse, Karl Stefan, Arthur (Art) Thomas, Robert E (Bob) Thomas, Foster May, Mrs T H Beeson Jr

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Photographs / Images: view to the west along Norfolk Avenue; early radio towers, Lincoln, 1920s; Karl Stefan; broadcasting equipment at KGBZ, York, c. 1930; Art Thomas; Hotel Norfolk; Harry Packard of KFAB (then a Lincoln station) doing a mobile broadcast in 1934; announcement of the scheduling of Voice of the People, Norfolk Daily News, August 7, 1946; radio department of Lawlor's, Lincoln, 1947



NORFOLK AVE. FROM 3RD STREET

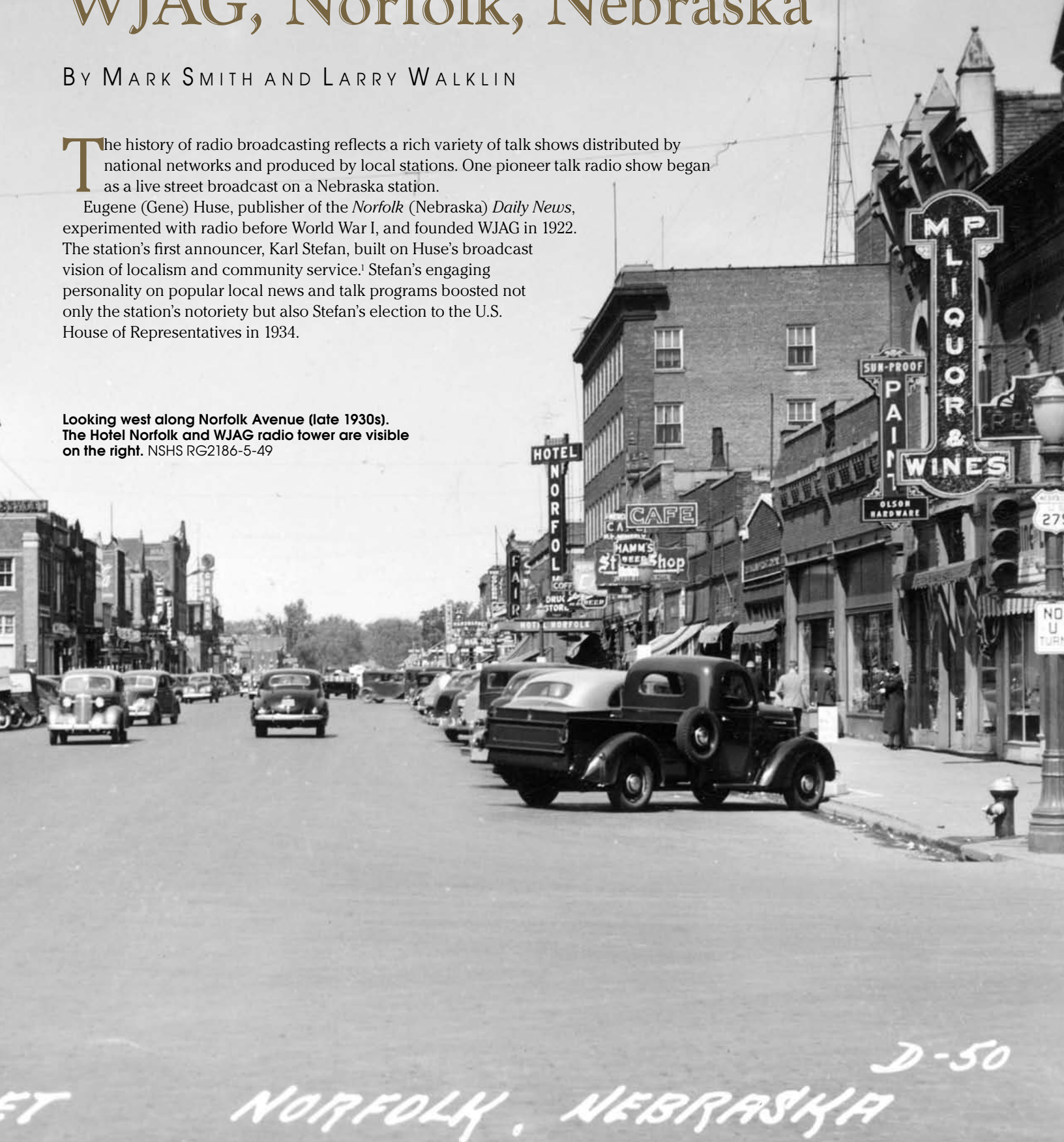
THE EARLY YEARS OF TALK RADIO: WJAG, Norfolk, Nebraska

BY MARK SMITH AND LARRY WALKLIN

The history of radio broadcasting reflects a rich variety of talk shows distributed by national networks and produced by local stations. One pioneer talk radio show began as a live street broadcast on a Nebraska station.

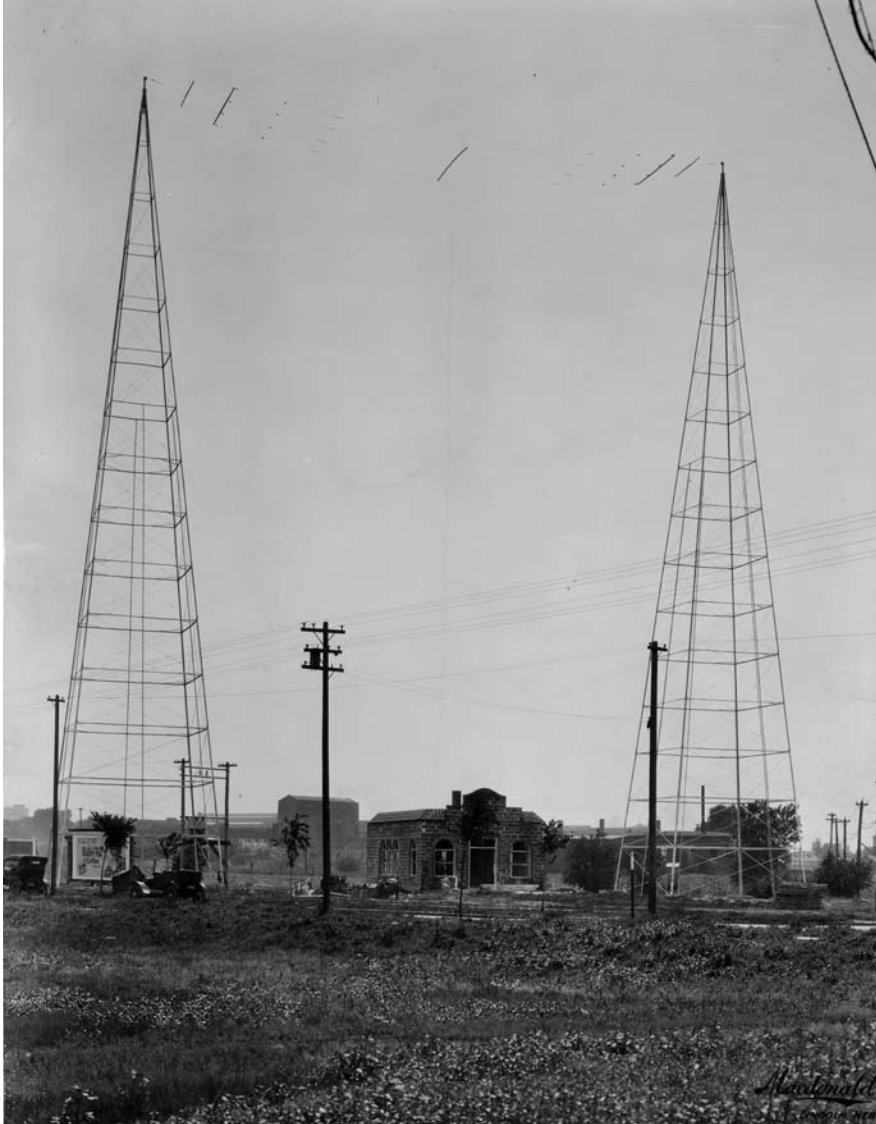
Eugene (Gene) Huse, publisher of the *Norfolk (Nebraska) Daily News*, experimented with radio before World War I, and founded WJAG in 1922. The station's first announcer, Karl Stefan, built on Huse's broadcast vision of localism and community service.¹ Stefan's engaging personality on popular local news and talk programs boosted not only the station's notoriety but also Stefan's election to the U.S. House of Representatives in 1934.

Looking west along Norfolk Avenue (late 1930s).
The Hotel Norfolk and WJAG radio tower are visible
on the right. NSHS RG2186-5-49



ET NORFOLK, NEBRASKA

D-50



Early radio towers, Lincoln, Nebraska, 1920s. NSHS RG2158-227

Before entering public service, Stefan created a program called *Voice of the Street* and served as its initial host. His successor, Arthur (Art) Thomas, overhauled the format just after the outbreak of World War II.² Controversial *Voice* topics jeopardized WJAG's license renewal in the 1940s and likely impacted the physical health of Thomas; however, his talk show strategies remained intact decades after his departure.

The Huse Publishing Company received a Limited Commercial, Land Radio Station license for WJAG on July 27, 1922. The Huse family, sole publisher of the *News* since 1888, thus has the longest broadcast claim in Nebraska.³

Publisher Gene Huse envisioned the new medium of radio as an ancillary service for the well-established *News* print operation. In its earliest

days, Huse dubbed his broadcast facility the "*Norfolk Daily News* Radio Station." WJAG promoted the *News*, and the latter also served as an advocate for its new media partner. In January 1924, the *News* began to promote WJAG with a column entitled "Radio Flashes." Published Monday through Saturday, "Flashes" publicized station programming, reception tips for WJAG listeners, and correspondence from the "radio family."⁴

The most notable voice behind the WJAG microphone throughout the 1920s and early 1930s, Karl Stefan, joined the *News* in 1909 as a telegrapher for the Associated Press.⁵ On September 13, 1922, WJAG's first day of regularly scheduled programming, Stefan announced the settlement of a nationwide railroad strike. Stefan departed the *News* city editor's desk in September 1924 to purchase a Norfolk cigar store and magazine distributorship, but continued on the air at WJAG.⁶ Stefan not only served as announcer, but also created local radio programming that endured years after his departure from broadcasting. The noon news report—the foundation of WJAG programming—featured news, bulletins, farm markets, weather, a hospital report, and area births.⁷ Stefan strengthened his ties with northeast Nebraska listeners through the creation of the WJAG Radio Family. He invited the audience to join him around a mythical table each noon hour and by 1932 nearly 100,000 listeners had contacted the station for memberships. Through the creation of familial and social titles Stefan communicated with listeners individually: father, mother, banker, baseball fan, and crippled girl, to name a few.⁸

Robert E. (Bob) Thomas, a longtime Norfolk resident who became WJAG manager in 1951, observed Stefan's growing popularity firsthand. According to Thomas, Stefan forged a special bond with listeners through his ability to speak with them one-on-one.⁹ Stefan connected with listeners, frequently by name, with a buoyant, homespun announcing style embedded in a German accent. On a typical WJAG broadcast he reminded a local farmer, Sam Kent, the current price of hogs would "make everything alright." Born in Bohemia and fluent in several tongues, Stefan deviated from English to connect with local immigrants. A frequent birthday message broadcast to listeners in both German and Bohemian reminded listeners, "I am wishing that you will live as many years as the fox has hairs on his tail."¹⁰

With the deepening Depression, radio provided affordable access to news and entertainment. Carrying considerable clout with listeners, Stefan

proposed to the station manager, Art Thomas, a new type of talk show that moved the announcer out of the studio and onto the sidewalks of Norfolk Avenue. Thomas agreed to provide the audio hardware and broadcast the *Voice of the Street*, hosted by Stefan. The program featured live interviews with pedestrians in downtown Norfolk, which were fed to the WJAG studios nearby. Although he requested no additional compensation, *Street* interviews with passersby in front of Stefan's cigar store certainly increased the visibility of the tobacco and magazine shop.¹¹ First broadcast in December 1932, the show was originally programmed as a thirty-minute feature, Monday through Friday; however, attracting sufficient pedestrian attention, particularly along a cold Norfolk sidewalk, likely contributed to a decision to shorten *Street* to a quarter hour one week after its premiere. By early January 1933, the weekday program had nestled into its longtime slot of 10:15 a.m.¹²

Stefan posed daily questions. In late 1932 he quizzed passersby on the state of farm prices, the cost of Nebraska state government, and the



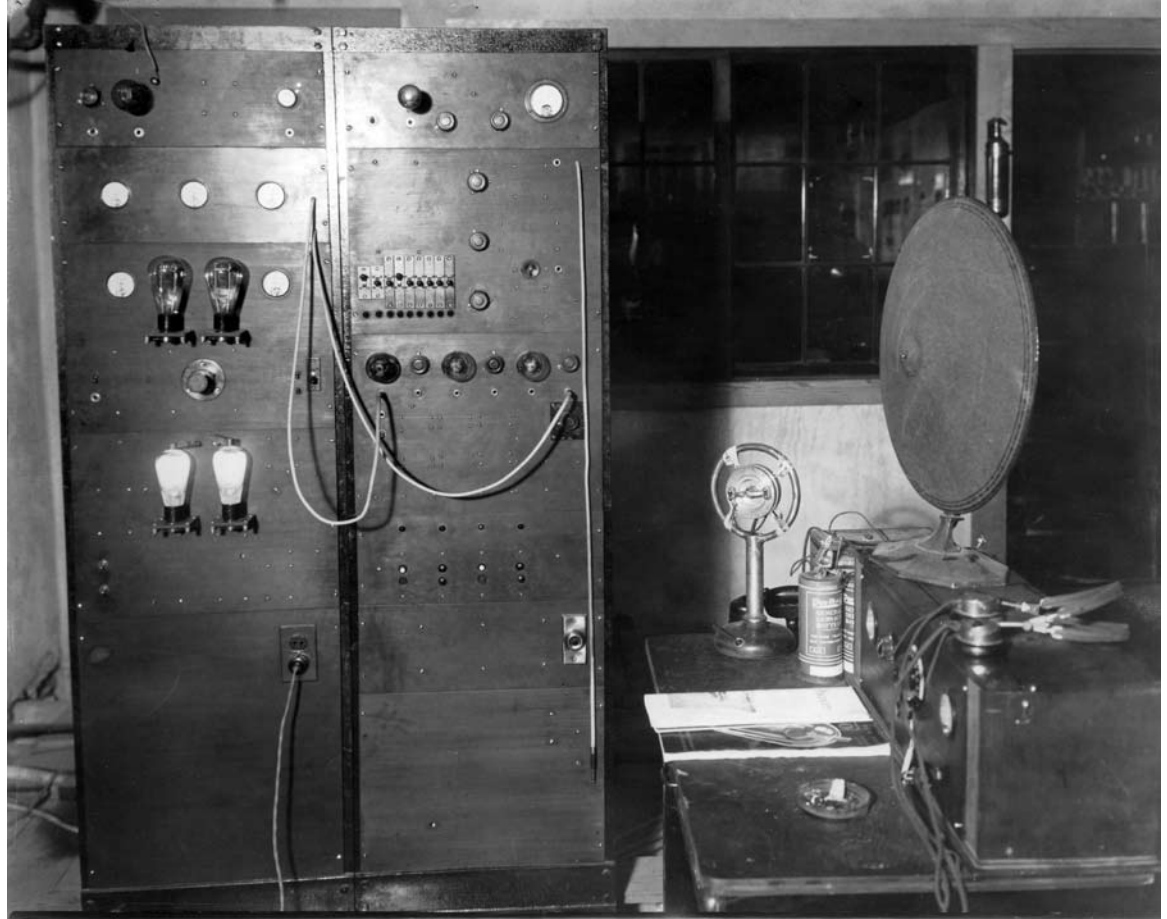
Karl Stefan forged a special bond with listeners on WJAG. His notoriety on the airwaves led to a petition drive urging him to run for Congress. He represented Nebraska's Third District from 1935 until his death in 1951. NSHS RG2411-5302b

differences between young people and the youth in the early 1900s. From 1933 through late 1937, the *News* used its robust subscriber base in northeast Nebraska to promote *Street* broadcasts in a daily column that printed responses attributed to pedestrians by name.¹³ Occasional *Street* broadcasts originated beyond the familiar downtown location, from county fairs to other local events—including an unusual show in May 1933 during which Stefan talked with young men standing in line naked at the Norfolk City Auditorium while they underwent physical exams for the government's forestry service program.¹⁴

With no broadcast competition for northeast Nebraska listeners within a fifty-mile radius of Norfolk, WJAG dominated local radio in the early 1930s with thousands of documented listeners in the radio family. The icon of WJAG had not considered a career in politics, but his listeners thought otherwise. In 1933, Stefan's notoriety on the airwaves translated into petitions with more than three thousand signatures from Third District voters, who urged Stefan to run for the U.S. House. The WJAG announcer acknowledged the public mandate and officially filed as a Republican in July 1934.¹⁵ A representative of the Republican State Committee said Stefan's broadcast duties had put him in touch with the issues affecting Third District residents. Stefan's regular appearances on the noon news and *Voice of the Street* continued throughout the primary and general election campaigns.¹⁶ In a major political upset in a year dominated by Democrats, Stefan swept the election from his Democratic opponent and longtime Representative, Edgar Howard, by nearly twenty thousand votes. Stefan carried every county in the Third District, which included Platte, Howard's home county.¹⁷ According to the *News*, Stefan's success hinged on, among other things, contacts with potential voters and listeners through *Voice of the Street*. Howard had acknowledged years earlier that Stefan's engaging announcing style had created favorable impressions among listeners that no doubt boosted his likeability among voters.¹⁸

Although Stefan was very successful as an interviewer and talk radio host, he was not the only broadcaster in Nebraska to experiment with talk radio. Foster May, like Stefan a member of the Nebraska Broadcasters Association Hall of Fame, became famous for his "on the street" interviews starting in 1933 on Lincoln station KFOR.¹⁹ A newspaper columnist described May's broadcast style as "pleasing, charming, luring, [and] exciting. And, as fuel for the voice is an amazing lot of cleverness

Broadcasting equipment at York, Nebraska, radio station KGBZ circa 1930. This is typical of the transmission setup found in many radio stations of that era, including WJAG. NSHS RG3174-3



and guile.”²⁰ May worked with the Lincoln station until 1935 when he moved to WOW, Omaha. The intro line “Take It Away, Foster May” was familiar to his audience. One local radio observer, Jack Dow, claimed that May commanded a substantial portion of local listeners, and like Stefan, May was attracted to politics. May ran for both U.S. House and Senate as a Democrat, but was not elected.²¹ May handled newscasts as well as interview and talk programs. According to a story at the time of his death, May, in his prime, insisted on doing all of the newscasts on WOW from 6 a.m. to midnight. May eventually worked in Los Angeles as a news supervisor for the ABC network. He died at the age of forty-seven as a result of throat cancer.²²

By 1935, WJAG had progressed from an irregular schedule of programming in the early 1920s to a full-service facility with a talk show that performed a community surveillance function: The opportunity to “listen in” on conversations broadcast from a busy Norfolk street. Karl Stefan had laid the foundation of *Street* as an early example of talk radio; however, his replacement host would be forced not only to revamp the show because of wartime

mandates but also weather the storms of a political controversy on *Street* programs that plunged the station into a mire of regulatory red tape.

Shortly after Art Thomas arrived in Norfolk to direct the North Nebraska Drouth Relief Committee, the *News* hired him in February 1932 to manage WJAG.²³ Thomas honed his writing, managerial, and promotional skills as a newspaper and trade publication editor, and later as a publicity director for the Omaha Chamber of Commerce. Thomas had joined the Stroud Manufacturing Company of Omaha, a producer of road-building equipment, in 1920. He stayed with Stroud as part owner and general manager for twelve years until his appointment to the drouth committee, charged with overseeing relief for area farmers ravaged by the Depression and excessively dry weather.²⁴

With Stefan’s departure to Congress, two of WJAG’s most popular programs, *Voice of the Street* and the noon news report, required new staffing. In late 1934, Art Thomas added those announcing duties to his managerial tasks. He conducted *Street* broadcasts with the notion “there’s a story



WJAG Station Manager Art Thomas hosted the controversial *Voice of the People* program in the late 1940s. Courtesy of WJAG, Norfolk, Nebraska

in that man, and I'm going to get it."²⁵ Two years later, WJAG observed five thousand days of broadcasting. For a special *Street* broadcast in August, Thomas handed the traveling microphone to four youngsters, who conducted the program.²⁶ By the late 1930s, WJAG's *Street* had achieved national exposure. *Radio Guide* observed: "In the best winning-friends-and-influencing-people manner, he [Thomas] asks a few leading questions. No rehearsing, no trick questions, or anything like that."

Thomas had moved the program a short distance from Stefan's Norfolk Avenue storefront to Fourth and Norfolk Avenue just outside the Hotel Norfolk, the location of the WJAG studios. Bad weather occasionally forced *Street* broadcasts inside the hotel lobby.²⁷ Like Stefan, Thomas had to convince hesitant pedestrians to address the radio audience. *WJAG News*, a public relations publication, printed a caricature of Thomas with his *Street* microphone in hand chasing a pedestrian in downtown Norfolk shouting, "But Lady—This Won't Hurt You!!" The 1938 cartoon assured potential interviewees "that Art Thomas doesn't chase the ladies on the *Voice of the Street* and we hope it doesn't deter you from stopping for a chat. . . ."²⁸ That same year *Broadcasting*, an industry publication, estimated more than eighty percent of homes in Madison County—WJAG's home county—had at least one

radio, a figure that matched national ownership. To mark the sixth anniversary of the *Street*, WJAG celebrated "Karl Stefan Day" in December. Representative Stefan conducted a *Street* broadcast and the noon news, and the radio staff profiled his life story.²⁹

In December 1941, the U.S. entered World War II. The 1934 Communications Act granted President Roosevelt wide latitude in his handling of wartime broadcasting. In place of mandatory restrictions the government created the Office of Censorship, an organization that prescribed wartime news guidelines, in December 1941.³⁰ The government requested cessation of broadcasts such as pedestrian interviews that might provide America's enemies with valuable information.³¹ Fearing that reports of favorable weather might also encourage enemy activity, weather information ended on WJAG in early 1942. The *Voice of the Street*, regularly broadcast on WJAG for ten years, was moved into the studio and renamed the *Voice of the People* on January 17, 1942. Staff discussions of listener letters replaced live street interviews. By September 1946, *People* had been shuttled from 10:15 a.m. (the *Street* time slot) to 12:45 p.m., Monday through Saturday.³²

Thomas continued to moderate *People* throughout World War II and the postwar years. He described the program as "entirely unrehearsed and anything is liable to happen and sometimes does."³³

In November 1946, the Federal Communications Commission (FCC) questioned the discussion of public issues on WJAG. The FCC informed the Norfolk station that renewal of its broadcast license, scheduled to expire November 1, had been delayed pending an investigation:

Built in 1926, the Hotel Norfolk was the home of WJAG radio until 1945. The building still stands at the northeast corner of Fourth Street and Norfolk Avenue, and is listed on the National Register of Historic Places. NSHS RG2186-5-76



WJAG was not the only Nebraska station to do mobile broadcasts in the early decades of radio. Harry Packard of Lincoln station KFAB (which moved to Omaha in 1948) broadcasts from the Nebraska State Fair in 1934. NSHS RG4626-1-8



The Commission has recently received a number of complaints . . . that material with respect to controversial issues of public importance broadcast over your facilities has not been presented with the fairness, objectivity and equality of treatment for all viewpoints required for operation in the public interest, and that the station has been utilized for propagation of the licensee's own personal views.³⁴

The FCC granted WJAG a sixty-day extension of its broadcast license pending an explanation from the Huse Publishing Company (*Norfolk Daily News*), the licensee of WJAG.³⁵ The FCC released the contents of five letters, which claimed WJAG presented one-sided views of public issues, criticized organizations, and berated individuals, primarily on *People*.³⁶ A Richland, Nebraska, man argued the "public interest" demanded an equitable discussion of public issues on WJAG: "It is reasonably supposed that a radio station, being a public communications facility, should impartially present both sides of all controversial questions. This, it will be conceded by a consensus of opinion, within the radius of this station has not been done."³⁷ Similar complaints had been drafted by residents of the nearby towns of Newman Grove and Lindsay, but the most specific and disparaging correspondence had been sent to the FCC from an Omaha woman.³⁸

In 1946, Mrs. T. H. Beeson, Jr., requested response time on WJAG's *People* to discuss broadcast statements of her affiliation with the Office of Price Administration's (OPA) National Consumers Advisory Committee. The OPA was created by the federal government to control wartime inflation through rationing, and price and wage controls. The OPA established volunteer boards in local communities to monitor the rationing of gasoline, automobiles, meat, and other consumer staples in World War II. President Truman relaxed wage and ration controls in 1945, but price controls remained intact. Truman vetoed a bill in June 1946 that would have further undermined OPA regulations. Without a congressional override or new legislation, price controls disappeared, which triggered economic inflation. By late July 1946, Truman signed revised legislation. Cattle producers protested renewed price ceilings on meat by withholding livestock. Amid adverse public reaction the president lifted those controls in October. A month later, Truman dismantled remaining regulations across the economic spectrum.³⁹

After the war, national discussions of possible Communist influence in government and society had filtered into local discussions on *People*. In a June 1946 *People* broadcast, Beeson discussed her membership in an OPA advisory committee

organized to render guidance on price controls. "I favor a strong OPA because I believe that humanity needs protection against profiteers who have endangered the existence of every nation since time began," she told the WJAG listeners.⁴⁰ Thomas questioned Beeson's support of OPA production controls at a local packing plant, which apparently resulted in meat shortages. Beeson also was affiliated with the League of Women Shoppers, a collective bargaining watchdog organized to investigate labor walkouts. The Omaha woman denied what she said was Thomas's assertion the league was a Communist-front organization.⁴¹ Beeson told northeast Nebraska listeners, "I do not feel able or anxious to make one trip after another to WJAG, asking for time to answer unfair, untrue [OPA] statements."⁴² Thomas noted the station's policy of reading letters on *People*, an outlet for listeners with pro-OPA viewpoints. The June broadcast produced fifty-eight pieces of correspondence. For more than a week, those responses were read on WJAG. Nearly 90 percent of the mail, station representatives claimed, expressed opposition to Beeson's viewpoints.⁴³

In an October 1946 written complaint to the FCC, Beeson charged that *People* broadcasts ridiculed her group associations: "I have been called Red, Radical, Communist, Atheist and many other such names by Mr. Thomas. . . . Listeners should be given an opportunity to at least hear something from the other side." On at least one occasion, Beeson claimed she was denied broadcast time to challenge a "personal attack." WJAG's OPA discussions, Beeson insisted, had evolved into "political propaganda" deserving of response time.⁴⁴ Months before Beeson's formal charge of politicization, Thomas consulted the National Association of Broadcasters (NAB) legal division. FCC rules governing equal opportunities for political candidates and discussions of election issues on broadcast stations did not apply, the NAB advised WJAG, to individuals who disagreed with on-air statements.⁴⁵ On a July 10, 1946, *People* broadcast, Thomas reminded WJAG listeners: "If a listener feels maligned, we can give him time if we wish to, and we always have done so. . . ."⁴⁶ In 1946 Thomas discussed Communism on *People*. In a February broadcast, he warned listeners, "Don't say Communism won't come to Northeast Nebraska. It has."⁴⁷ Thomas publicly expressed political statements outside the WJAG studios, as well. In a speech to local Rotarians, Thomas claimed that Communist influences were present in the Norfolk area:

**"Don't say Communism
won't come to Northeast
Nebraska. It has."**

Some of you have accused me of seeing Reds [Communists] under the bed. If you would read some of the [local] letters we get from radicals you would be concerned about the U.S. too. Fortunately the percentage is not large, but it is growing. . . .

If you are one who thinks I talk too much about communism and believe that I am unduly alarmed . . . won't you please come in to my office some afternoon . . . and let me show what some people are saying and doing right here in Madison county and the county's [sic] around us. . . . You will be amazed.⁴⁸

In December 1946, WJAG responded to FCC allegations of broadcasting divergent viewpoints in an unfair manner. Thomas reminded the Commission that the 1946 FCC publication *Public Service Responsibilities of the Broadcast Licensee*, popularly known by the color of its cover as the "blue book," encouraged discussions of public issues. "When a

Norfolk Daily News,
August 7, 1946.

VOICE OF THE PEOPLE
Special Saturday Noon Program

Saturdays only, starting Aug. 10

Starting Saturday, August 10, the Voice of the People on Saturdays will be heard at 12:45 noon, following the news. This change is being made at the request of many women listeners who would like to have their men folks enjoy the program during the noon hour.

The 10:15 a.m. program on Saturdays will be called the "Voice of the News." This change applies to Saturdays only. On the other days of the week the Voice of the People will be heard at 10:15 a.m., as in the past.

780 a Good Spot on Your Dial **WJAG** Norfolk Nebr.
"Radio Voice of The Norfolk Daily News"
AT RADIO CENTER ON NORFOLK AVE. AND 6TH ST.

The radio department at Lawlor's, 1118 O Street in Lincoln, December 10, 1947. NSHS RG2183-1947-1210



station broadcasts this type of program,” Thomas said, “it is liable to criticism from those who disagree, particularly if they are of the emotional and promotional type.”⁴⁹ Regarding equal treatment of Beeson’s views, the FCC was told, “She was given time on WJAG and was never denied it, nor has anybody else been denied time on WJAG except those who wanted to make political broadcasts free.” In addition, Thomas pointed to WJAG’s quarter century of stellar radio service in northeast Nebraska.⁵⁰ WJAG owner Gene Huse assured FCC chairman Charles Denny in March 1947 that “every one of the alleged objections has been eliminated and I will continue to do my utmost to see that there will be no reason for any complaints in the future.”⁵¹ A report compiled by Thomas examined Beeson’s charges and reiterated station policies:

I do not believe I ever called Mrs. Beeson a Red, Communist, or atheist. I may have called her a radical. I would need time to check on that.

I never refused her time on the air nor to ‘several people’ as she charges. . . .

I read over the [*Voice of the People*] program every letter she [Beeson] sent me. . . .

If we think a letter is libelous we either don’t read it [on the air] or cut out portions. Some long winded letters are condensed. . . . Some say the same things that others have more ably said. We get more letters than we have time to read. But we do try to pick out letters on a diversity of subjects representing all points of view. . . . No sinister hand is keeping any letter from our audience. There is complete freedom of speech, within the bounds of good taste and the laws of libel.⁵²

Representative Stefan wrote to FCC Secretary T. J. Slowie on behalf of WJAG, praising its broadcast service with the belief “irresponsible individuals now seek to enlist the F.C.C. in their plan to ruin a responsible medium of real public service.”⁵³ The FCC inquiry continued in 1947; WJAG received sixty-day extensions of its license in December

1946 and February 1947.⁵⁴ In a March 1947 letter to Gene Huse, Stefan expressed his bewilderment about the lengthy FCC investigation. "I just don't know what the hell is happening down there [at the FCC]," Stefan confessed. "I talked to the [Commission] Secretary today and he would not talk to me over the telephone about WJAG. He wants to talk to me personally and says he is coming down [to my Washington office] within the next few days."⁵⁵ Huse praised the coverage of opposing viewpoints on WJAG. "We could not rate 66.5 percent of Norfolk listeners [tuned to WJAG] on this Voice of the People program if we were anything but fair," he told Stefan.⁵⁶

The strain of battling the FCC and disgruntled listeners had taken its toll on Thomas and may have strained the relationship between Thomas and owner Gene Huse. In February 1947, as the government's inquiry plodded forward, station owner Huse confided to Stefan that Thomas had engaged in "crusades" that resulted in "a mess" with the FCC.⁵⁷ On the morning of April 13, 1947, Thomas awakened with impaired vision after suffering a stroke. A day later, the Commission renewed WJAG's broadcast license through November 1949. WJAG received a standard three-year license retroactive to November 1, 1946, the original renewal date.⁵⁸ Huse relayed word of the FCC action to Thomas, who was recuperating in a local hospital. Huse wrote Stefan that "the old boy perked right up . . . I think that worry over this license has been a big part in causing his trouble."⁵⁹ It had been a turbulent year at WJAG. The station survived FCC scrutiny of its broadcast operation, and the community almost lost a local broadcast veteran. Stefan expressed his relief to Huse that the investigation had ended:

...not only [is the renewal] a vindication for WJAG and its staff, but it is vindication for Art Thomas who has been so loyal and has tried so hard to carry out the rules and regulations of the Federal Communications Commission. . . . From what I can gather, the entire Commission feels as I do about it.⁶⁰

Thomas, who suffered impaired vision after his stroke, participated in but did not lead *People* discussions after May 1947. Thomas relinquished his managerial duties in March 1951 and died in June.⁶¹ Representative Stefan died unexpectedly a few months later, in October.⁶²

An era of pioneer programming had ended on WJAG; however, incarnations of the *Voice of the People* lived on. Edited listener letters, a staple of

People programming since World War II, were read on air until the introduction of enhanced telephony technology in the 1980s, which allowed WJAG to place one or more callers on the air for conversations with the host. In November 2004 the *Voice* ended after more than nearly eighty years on the air, first as a traveling *Street* microphone and later as a *People* studio talk show. For nearly its entire studio schedule, at least two station staffers read and debated listener letters and, in later years, discussed national, state, and local issues with listeners on the telephone interface. Limitations in staffing and a drop in listener participation prompted the station general manager to discontinue the program.⁶³

The historical record suggests that early talk radio in Norfolk fulfilled two functions. First, locally produced, pioneer talk on WJAG forged strong but controversial connections with the audience, a strategy that mirrors contemporary radio programming. Second, after the war WJAG talk programming had been justified by management to satisfy FCC obligations of providing public affairs shows that serve local needs. Finally, the hosts of talk radio at WJAG in the 1930s and 1940s fashioned durable imprints on local talk radio. Karl Stefan and Art Thomas had successfully created, shaped, and contributed to a popular model of listener engagement that endured more than eight decades at WJAG and is a broadcast industry staple in modern times. 📺

NOTES

1. Mark Smith, "The Early Years of Broadcasting in Norfolk, Nebraska, 1922-1928," *Nebraska History* 79:2 (Summer 1998): 54-68. WJAG is still owned by the Huse family.

2. Mark Smith, "Karl Stefan, WJAG, and the Congressional Campaign of 1934," *Nebraska History* 81:2 (Summer 2000): 74-82.

3. A 1922 edition of the *Norfolk Daily News* states that "a broadcasting license was issued to The News by the government." "Norfolk News Radio Station is in Action," *Norfolk Daily News* (hereafter cited as *NDN*), Sept. 14, 1922, 1; Quentin S. Proctor, Federal Communications Commission (FCC), Washington, D.C., Autograph Letter Signed (hereafter cited as ALS), to L. G. Delay, Nebraska State Historical Society (hereafter cited as NSHS), Lincoln, March 22 1973, Nebraska Radio Collection (hereafter cited as NRC), NSHS, Lincoln. T. J. Stowie, Federal Communications Commission (hereafter cited as FCC), Washington, D.C., to Bob Thomas, WJAG, Norfolk, Nebraska, Autograph Letter Signed (hereafter cited as ALS), May 3, 1953, WJAG subject files (hereafter cited as WJAG papers), Norfolk, Nebraska.

Nine stations received federal licenses in Nebraska prior to WJAG. Only WJAG and WAAW, the latter founded by the Omaha Grain Exchange in April 1922, were still on the air in the 2000s. WAAW, however, has experienced multiple owners and call letter changes since 1922 (KOWH, KMEO, and later, KCRO).

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The *Omaha World-Herald*, which purchased WAAW in 1939 and changed its call letters to KOWH, sold the station in 1949. In the ensuing decades, there were several ownership and call-letter changes. Today, the station is known as KCRO. Fred Stafford, "Improving City a High Priority," *NDN*, May 1, 1987, 13(A); Proctor to Delay, NRC; WJAG, *A Celebration of Tradition, WJAG, 1922-1987* (Norfolk, Nebraska: privately printed, 1987), 5; "Omaha on Air First in 1922," *Omaha World-Herald* (Sunday), Sept. 29, 1935, 7(H); "FCC Upholds WAAW Sale to Newspaper," *Broadcasting-Broadcast Advertising*, Mar. 1, 1939, 15; "Radio Stations 40 or More Years Old in 1962," *Broadcasting (Special Report)*, May 14, 1962, 130; *Nebraska Broadcasters Association, Lincoln, NE, 2011 NBA Membership Directory*.

⁴ By late 1922, WJAG was also billed as "The *News* radio station" and the "Norfolk Daily News broadcasting station." From 1922 to 1925, the "Radio Flashes" column offered numerous reception tips for radio listeners. "Norfolk News Radio Station is in Action," 1; "Prominent Men Talk to Radio Fans From 'WJAG,'" *NDN*, Oct. 12, 1922, 9; "'WJAG' Schedule Published for Radio Boosters," *NDN*, Dec. 18, 1922, 2; "Radio Flashes," *NDN*, Jan. 29, 1924, 5; Mar. 1, 1924, 3; Jan. 20, 1925, 8; Oct. 17, 1925, 3; Nov. 3, 1925, 3.

⁵ In the early 1900s, the *News* received AP dispatches via telegraph, which Stefan decoded and rewrote for the newspaper. Later, he became a reporter and city editor. Art Thomas, WJAG, in Congress, House, Representative Carl Mapes of Michigan speaking on the life of Karl Stefan, *Congressional Record* 76th Cong., 1st sess. 84, pt. 2 (Jan. 9, 1939): 50-52.

⁶ Ted Landale, "Gene Huse, Doer of Other Things," *Sunday Omaha World-Herald Magazine*, Jan. 7, 1951, 5(C); "Norfolk News Radio Station is in Action," 1; "Karl Stefan Leaves *News* for Business," *NDN*, Sept. 2, 1924, 2.

⁷ "Radio Flashes," *NDN*, Jan. 26, 1929, 10; "WJAG to Offer New Features Next Week," *NDN*, Nov. 30, 1928, 7.

⁸ In the 1920s, "cripple" was considered an appropriate term for a person with a physical disability. "Let's Go! WJAG Throws a Party!" *Radio Digest*, Feb. 20, 1926, 5, 24; "Ten Years on the Air," Karl Stefan, July 17, 1932, WJAG papers; "Many Persons Comprised 'Official' WJAG Family," *NDN*, July 25, 1952, 4.

⁹ James Denney, "He Rode Radio to Congress," *Sunday Omaha World-Herald Magazine of the Midlands*, Oct. 29, 1972, 9; Bob Thomas, interview by author (Mark Smith), July 14, 1997.

¹⁰ Stefan also encouraged listeners with this homily: "Just another day to live, to work and to play and with the night, let's recall the day's joys, the worries and the cares, and let's find no hatred there." *Congressional Record* 84, pt. 2 (Jan. 9, 1939): 50-51; Karl Stefan, United Nations program, sound recording, circa 1952, WJAG audio archives; "'Hello Friends, Hello Everybody'—Karl Stefan's Noonday Greeting on WJAG," *NDN*, July 25, 1952; Letter from Mae Lee Moldenhauer, WJAG office manager, to Mr. Ross Rice, Fremont, NE, August 26, 1960, WJAG papers.

¹¹ *Congressional Record* 84, pt. 2 (Jan. 9, 1939): 51.

¹² No historical documentation is known to exist to explain how the audio signal was transmitted from Stefan's storefront to the WJAG studios, nor a few years later when the program was conducted two floors below the studio level in front of the Hotel Norfolk. Stefan recalled "the difficulty to get [shy] people to talk into the microphone." "Will Quiz Norfolk People Over Radio," *NDN*, Dec. 16, 1932, 6; "Radio Flashes," *NDN*, Dec. 17, 1932, 3; Dec. 21, 1932, 3; Jan. 14, 1933, 3; Karl Stefan, Karl Stefan's Speech, WJAG anniversary broadcast, July 25, 1937, WJAG papers.

¹³ The final "Voice of the Street" column appeared in the *News* on Nov. 15, 1937. "Voice of the Street" promotional ad, *NDN*, Dec. 17, 1932, 3; "Voice of the Street," *NDN*, Jan. 16, 1933, 5; Nov. 15, 1937, 7.

¹⁴ George Marshall, "Streetcasting Veteran," *Radio Guide*, Apr. 9, 1938; "Voice of the Street," *NDN*, May 17, 1933, 2.

¹⁵ "Karl Stefan Urged to Run for Congress," *NDN*, June 26, 1934, 2; *Congressional Record* 84, pt. 2 (Jan. 9, 1939): 51; "Karl Stefan to Enter Campaign for Congressman," *NDN*, July 3, 1934, 2.

¹⁶ The Radio Act of 1927 and Communications Act of 1934 state: "If any licensee shall permit any person who is a legally qualified candidate for any public office to use a broadcasting station, he shall afford equal opportunities to all other such candidates for that office in the use of such broadcasting station." The government did not formally render until the 1960s that news broadcasts by station employees, running as political candidates, constituted a use. No documentation is known to exist that challenged Stefan's use of the airwaves or whether equal opportunities had been granted to Stefan's opponents. "Enthusiasm is Pronounced at Stefan Rally," *NDN*, Sept. 28, 1934, 1; "Radio Flashes," *NDN*, Aug. 18, 1934, 3; "Politicians Ask Stefan Secrets of His Campaign," *NDN*, Nov. 9, 1934, 5; 47 U.S.C. §315(a), <http://www.fcc.gov/mb/policy/political/candrule.htm>. For FCC rulings on broadcasters seeking political office, see Newscaster Candidacy, 40 F.C.C. 433 (1965) and WBAX, 17 F.C.C. 2d 316 (1969).

¹⁷ *Congressional Quarterly, Congressional Quarterly's Guide to U.S. Elections* (Washington: Congressional Quarterly Inc., 1994), 1176; "Democrats Sweep to Victory in Nebraska," *NDN*, Nov. 7, 1934, 1; "Stefan Winner in Landslide," *NDN*, Nov. 7, 1934, 1.

¹⁸ "Politicians Ask Stefan Secrets of His Campaign," 5; "Stefan No Longer Paid Announcer," *NDN*, Nov. 10, 1934, 5.

¹⁹ *Omaha World-Herald*, Aug. 12, 1942.

²⁰ *Ibid.*, Aug. 13, 1942.

²¹ *Ibid.*, Aug. 19, 1976; Mar. 31, 1952, 24.

²² Another notable Nebraska broadcaster of the time was George Kister, whose career at KFKX in Hastings and KMMJ in Grand Island spanned forty-three years. Kister did not run for public office, but his long career as a popular radio newscaster in east-central Nebraska brought him the high levels of audience recognition enjoyed by Stefan and by May. Kister, who started in radio in 1926, was, perhaps, more of an early contemporary of Stefan than was May. Both Stefan and Kister started when radio was new and before it became a normal part of the household routine. By the time May started and Thomas took over the WJAG program from Stefan the audience for news, interviews and talk programming was accustomed to the program possibilities. *Omaha World-Herald*, Mar. 31, 1952. George Kister, Speech to the Nebraska Broadcasters Association convention, Lincoln, 1980.

²³ "A. C. Thomas will be New Manager of WJAG," *NDN*, Feb. 6, 1932, 5; Art Thomas, personal journal, WJAG papers.

²⁴ Art Thomas, personal journal, WJAG papers.

²⁵ Art Thomas began conducting *Street* broadcasts full-time on Dec. 5, 1934 and the noon report, in place of Stefan, on Dec. 24, 1934. "Radio Flashes," *NDN*, Dec. 4, 1934, 8; Dec. 22, 1934, 3; Art Thomas, in "Streetcasting Veteran."

²⁶ Art Thomas, Musical Roll Call, WJAG anniversary broadcast, July 25, 1937.

²⁷ Marshall, "Streetcasting Veteran."

²⁸ WJAG, "Voice of the Street," *WJAG News*, June 1938, 1.

²⁹ *Broadcasting-Broadcast Advertising 1939 Yearbook* (Washington: Broadcasting Publications, Inc., 1939), 42, 52; *Congressional Record* 84, pt. 2 (Jan. 9, 1939): 50-52.

³⁰ Section 606(a) of the Communications Act of 1934 describes the President's broadcast powers in wartime: "During the continuance of a war in which the United States is engaged, the President is authorized, if he finds it necessary for the national defense and security, to direct that such communications as in his judgment may be essential to the national defense and security shall have preference or priority with any carrier subject to this Act. He may give these directions at and for such times as he may determine. . . ." *Statutes at Large* 68, pt. 1 (Mar. 1933 to

June 1934): 1104; Barnouw, *The Golden Web, a History of Broadcasting in the United States, Volume II, 1933 to 1953* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1968), 156.

³¹ Barnouw, *The Golden Web*, 156; "Code of Wartime Practices for American Broadcasters," *Broadcasting-Broadcast Advertising*, Feb. 15, 1943, 24.

³² Bob Thomas, Voice of the People historical memorandum, Aug. 29, 1978, WJAG papers; "Voice of the People" promotional ad, *NDN*, Aug. 7, 1946, 6; "Radio Flashes," *NDN*, Aug. 30, 1946, 9.

³³ Wartime demands created the *Voice of the People*. "Art Thomas Retires as Manager of Station WJAG," *NDN*, Mar. 7, 1951, 1; Art Thomas, Newscasting, Madison Rotary Club speech, Oct. 21, 1946, WJAG papers.

³⁴ T. J. Slowie, Secretary, FCC, Washington, D.C., to *NDN* and WJAG, copy, Dec. 2, 1946, Nebraska State Historical Society, Karl Stefan file (hereafter cited as Stefan papers).

³⁵ T. J. Slowie, Secretary, FCC, Washington, D.C., to Honorable Karl Stefan, Norfolk, Nebraska, copy, Dec. 2, 1946, Stefan papers.

³⁶ The FCC informed Stefan it released "typical copies of the complaints received" to the licensee. In similar comments to Art Thomas, the FCC stated, "We are enclosing copies of a number of them [complaints] which are similar in content to the others we have received." A review of Stefan's papers, WJAG historical material, and a search for FCC documents failed to uncover a precise number of complaints. A Freedom of Information Act request submitted to the FCC struck a dead end. FCC documents from the 1940s are stored in the Federal Records Center in Suitland, Maryland. According to the FCC, government records questioning WJAG's license renewal in 1946-47 were "either misfiled or missing." The license renewal postponement was documented through station newsletters and the Stefan papers. Slowie, to Stefan, copy, Dec. 2 1946, Stefan papers; Slowie to *NDN* and WJAG, copy, Dec. 2, 1946, Stefan papers; Roy J. Stewart, Chief, Mass Media Bureau, FCC, Washington, D.C., to Mark Smith, Autograph Letter Signed, Sept. 12, 1997.

³⁷ Fred Hoppe, Richland, Nebraska, to Russel [Rosel] H. Hyde, Washington, D.C., copy, Oct. 22, 1946.

³⁸ The Stefan papers reveal that two Newman Grove residents and a Lindsay couple expressed their views of WJAG to the FCC. Elmer V. Weinberger, Newman Grove, Nebraska, To Whom It May Concern, copy, Oct. 19, 1946, Stefan papers; Miles E. McDonnell, Newman Grove, Nebraska, to Commissioner of Federal Communication [sic], copy, Oct. 21, 1946, Stefan papers; Mr. and Mrs. H. G. Franek, Lindsay, Nebraska, to Paul Walker, FCC, Washington, D.C., copy, Oct. 22, 1946, Stefan papers.

³⁹ Art Thomas, "Program of the Year by OPA Woman," *WJAG News*, July 1946, 1; Andrew H. Bartels, "Office of Price Administration," in *The Greenwood Encyclopedia of American Institutions* [incomplete reference], 421-26.

⁴⁰ "Statement by Omaha OPA Woman," *WJAG News*, July 1946, 1.

⁴¹ Thomas, "Program of the Year by OPA Woman," 1.

⁴² "Statement by Omaha OPA Woman," 1.

⁴³ Thomas, "Program of the Year by OPA Woman," 1.

⁴⁴ Mrs. T. H. Beeson, Omaha, Nebraska, to FCC, Washington, D.C., copy, Oct. 22, 1946, Stefan papers.

⁴⁵ In correspondence to the FCC, Beeson included an exchange of comments with Thomas, charging him with politicization of OPA issues. Months earlier, *WJAG News* printed the text of a July 10, 1946, *People* broadcast that questioned Beeson's viewpoints. Beeson, to FCC, copy, Oct. 22, 1946, Stefan papers; WJAG, "OPA Woman Misquoted FCC," *WJAG News*, July 1946, 3.

⁴⁶ "OPA Woman Misquoted FCC," 3.

⁴⁷ Art Thomas, CIO PAC Worker's Radio Handbook Used Against WJAG, Voice of the People, typewritten document, Feb. 6, 1946, Stefan papers.

⁴⁸ Art Thomas, Newscasting, Oct. 21, 1946, Stefan papers.

⁴⁹ Thomas quoted part III, section C of the "blue book": "The commission, in determining whether a station has served the public interest, will take into consideration the amount of time which has been or will be devoted to the discussion of public issues." The investigation of WJAG's controversial programming was not an isolated incident. In 1941, a Boston station had been chastised by the FCC for controversial commentary. See *Mayflower Broadcasting Corp.*, 8 F.C.C. 333 (1941). Another section of the "blue book" states: "the public interest clearly requires that an adequate amount of time be made available for the discussion of public issues." (See *Public Service Responsibility of Broadcast Licensees*, FCC memorandum issued Mar. 7, 1946, at 40). Art Thomas, to T. J. Slowie, Secretary, FCC, Washington, D.C., copy, Dec. 7, 1946, Stefan papers.

⁵⁰ Thomas, to Slowie, copy, Dec. 7, 1946, Stefan papers.

⁵¹ A few weeks after Huse wrote the FCC, Representative Stefan informed Huse that the Commission required a more thorough explanation of station policies governing the discussion of public issues. "[The FCC chairman] suggests that it might be advisable to include in the statement a description of the Voice of the People program . . . and the method employed by you to assure that all sides of controversial issues are fairly presented," Stefan said. Another response from Huse was sent the FCC in April 1947, but a copy of that document was not uncovered by the authors. Gene Huse, *NDN*, to Charles R. Denny, Chairman, FCC, Washington, D.C., copy, Mar. 21, 1947, Stefan papers; Stefan to Huse, copy, Apr. 1, 1947, Stefan papers; Stefan to Charles R. Denny, FCC, Washington, D.C., copy, Apr. 9, 1947, Stefan papers.

⁵² The background report was not addressed to any particular individual or government agency. Available historical documents do not support allegations that Art Thomas labeled Beeson a "Red, Radical, Communist [or] Atheist" on WJAG broadcasts. Art Thomas, Comment on Beeson Appeal, Dec. 7, 1946, Stefan papers.

⁵³ Stefan to T. J. Slowie, Secretary, FCC, Washington, D.C., copy, Dec. 9, 1946, Stefan papers.

⁵⁴ The license extensions were granted, *Broadcasting* stated, "pending consideration of information requested under Sec. 308(b)" of the 1934 Communications Act, which states: "The Commission . . . during the term of any such license, may require from an applicant or licensee further written statements of fact to enable it to determine whether such original application should be granted or denied or such license revoked." Actions of the FCC, *Broadcasting*, Jan. 6, 1947, 62; Actions of the FCC, *Broadcasting*, Mar. 3, 1947, 61; *Statutes at Large* 68, pt. 1 (Mar. 1933 to June 1934): 1085.

⁵⁵ No documents are known to exist of a Stefan-FCC meeting in Mar. 1947. Stefan to Huse, copy, Mar. 21, 1947, Stefan papers.

⁵⁶ Huse to Stefan, ALS, Apr. 4, 1947, Stefan papers.

⁵⁷ *Ibid.*, ALS, Feb. 2, 1947, Stefan papers.

⁵⁸ WJAG, "Art Thomas' Health," *WJAG News*, July 1947, 1; Actions of the FCC, *Broadcasting*, Apr. 21, 1947, 74; Stefan to Huse, copy, Apr. 14, 1947, Stefan papers.

⁵⁹ Huse to Stefan, ALS, Apr. 14, 1947, Stefan papers.

⁶⁰ Stefan to Huse, copy, Apr. 14, 1947, Stefan papers.

⁶¹ "Art Thomas' Health," 1; "Art Thomas Retires as Manager of Station WJAG," *NDN*, Mar. 7, 1951, 1; "Art Thomas, 66, Former Manager of WJAG, Taken," *NDN*, June 4, 1951, 1.

⁶² "Heart Ailment is Fatal to Champion of Third District," *NDN*, Oct. 2, 1951, 1.

⁶³ Brad Hughes, G.M., WJAG, telephone interview with Mark Smith, Aug. 29, 2008.