

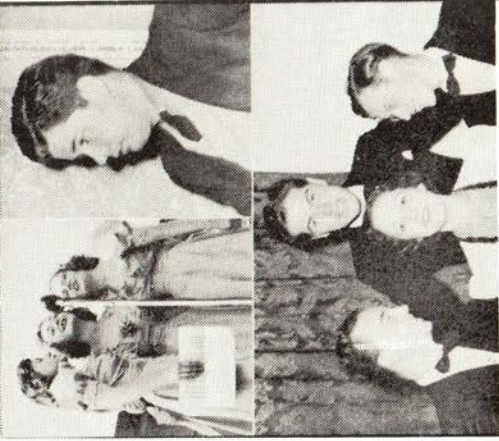
The Musical Steelmakers

RADIO'S ORIGINAL EMPLOYEE FAMILY BROADCAST

EMPLOYEE HEADLINERS FROM MILLS, OFFICES & FACTORIES

THE SINGING MILLMEN ★ DOROTHY ANNE CROW ★ JEAN AND HER BOY FRIENDS

THE STEELE SISTERS ★ THE OLD TIMER ★ WALTER PATTERSON



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UPPER OHIO VALLEY
HISTORICAL REVIEW
1992-1993

ELEANOR STEBER

- *Leading Soprano* -

EDWIN BILTCLIFFE AT THE PIANO

COLLEGE HALL

WEST LIBERTY STATE COLLEGE

NOVEMBER 7, 1966 — 8:30 P. M.

PROGRAM

I

Lusinghe piu care Handel
O del mio dolce ardor Gluck
Recitative and aria, Dove sono, from "Le Nozze di Figaro" Mozart

II

Hermit Songs Barber
At Saint Patrick's Purgatory
Church Bell at Night
St. Ita's Vision
The Heavenly Banquet
The Crucifixion
Sea-Snatch
Promiscuity
The Monk and his Cat
The Praises of God
The Desire for Hermitage

III

Recitative and aria, Ernani, involami, from "Ernani" Verdi

INTERMISSION

IV

Air de Lia, from "L'Enfant Prodigue" Debussy
Chevaux de bois
Le Chevelure
De fleurs

V

Medley of American Folk Songs

Simple Gifts Arr. Aaron Copland
Go 'Way from my Window Arr. John Jacob Niles
Mighty lak' a Rose Ethelbert Nevin
On top of old Smokey Original
I Wonder as I Wander John Jacob Niles
He's Goin' Away John Jacob Niles
Wild Rider John Jacob Niles

Management

MILDRED SHAGAL INC.

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COVER: Reproduction of the original poster, circa 1942, promoting
The Musical Steelmakers and "It's Wheeling Steel."

Cyrus and Jane McNeely: Teacher Training Advocates

By Erving E. Beauregard

Cyrus and Jane McNeely were a husband-wife team devoted to humanitarianism. They worked avidly in several areas to improve humanity's lot. They stood forth in the realm of teacher training.

Cyrus McNeely was born on May 9, 1809, in Cadiz, Harrison County, Ohio. His father, Andrew McNeely, of Irish descent, had migrated in 1802 from Berks County, Pennsylvania, to Cadiz. Becoming prominent in Harrison County, Andrew served four years in Cadiz where he was a noted businessman.¹ Cyrus's mother, Sarah Bettie, hailed from Philadelphia.

In 1821, the McNeelys moved to the Beech Spring area in Green Township, just east of Cadiz in Harrison County. Here Cyrus worked on the family farm and also attended Cadiz Academy. At the latter he much admired the teaching of Daniel McIntosh, Jefferson College Class of 1817. Upon graduating from Cadiz Academy in 1826, Cyrus considered college. His choice was Franklin College, New Athens, Harrison County, Ohio. However, he bowed to his father's disapproval. Andrew McNeely, a fervent Freemason, disliked Franklin because its founder and chairman of the board of trustees, the Reverend John Walker, was a staunch antimason. Cyrus enrolled at Greeneville College, Greeneville, Tennessee.² There, where his life was uneventful, he graduated in 1830.³

The year 1830 also proved significant for Cyrus McNeely in the spiritual area. His Presbyterian parents had raised him in their faith. Influenced by the dynamic preaching of Alexander Campbell, he joined the Disciples of Christ. Eventually he became a minister; although he occasionally preached, he never held a pastorate; however, he did officiate at a number of marriages.⁴ McNeely was a generous contributor to the Disciples of Christ, his money being derived from successful farming and various businesses in Harrison County, Ohio.⁵

One of McNeely's business trips took him to Cincinnati. This led to contact with William and Christian Donaldson, brother proprietors of a prosperous hardware business in that Ohio River town. The brothers introduced Cyrus to their sister, Jane. On May 19, 1837, Cyrus and Jane were married in Cincinnati.⁶

Jane Donaldson McNeely was an impressive person. Balance, charm, self-sacrifice characterized her. In April 1808, she was born in Cornwall, England. In 1820, her parents took her and her sister, Mary, and four brothers to the United States. They settled on a farm near New Richmond, Ohio. A few years later William and Christian Donaldson took their sisters to Cincinnati where the brothers became prominent businessmen.⁷

William Lloyd Garrison's fiery preaching led the Donaldsons to join the antislavery crusade. In 1836, a proslavery mob in Cincinnati smashed the printing press of the fervent abolitionist James G. Birney. Then the mob, believing Birney was at the Donaldsons' house, rushed there, clamoring for him and Christian Donaldson. The Donaldson

on Saturday, 6 October. The Wheeling papers for 4 October contain a fairly detailed account of her life and achievements. The *Intelligencer* states that she sang 404 performances at the Metropolitan Opera in 33 roles, and that her entire repertoire included 56 roles (her book lists 54). Her unusual versatility in being able to handle roles as diverse as Marie in *Wozzeck* or the various Mozart heroines in which she was judged to be without peer is still a source of amazement to singers today.

In the concluding chapters of her autobiography Ms. Steber becomes more introspective and evaluative concerning her life and work. In respect to her two marriages, she comments (page 247), "I must consider, as I look back, whether it is possible for someone like me to have a normal marriage in the face of the demands of a career like mine. I have serious doubts. I was a divided person through all those years and, except for my music, I have no clear idea of where my head was ... For me, singing is life! When I am singing, then I am a unified spirit ... God has given me this gift and somehow or other, no matter what I've done with my life—the bad as well as the good—the gift has never been taken from me." The closing chapter, entitled "Coda," becomes even more philosophical and introspective, and it provides the final clues to what made Eleanor Steber what she was.

And this raises the ultimate question: what is Eleanor Steber's position in music history? The passage of time has now put her life and work into perspective, and an objective evaluation of her work apart from both herself and the professional critics is now possible. There is no doubt that on the international musical scene she was one of the greatest sopranos of the entire twentieth century. Being American, she did not specialize in any one repertoire, but instead developed an unusually broad scope of operatic roles, though her Mozart interpretations are generally conceded to be among her best—and the best by anyone. This broad repertoire plus her excellent sense of the stage made her reputation as the "workhorse" of the Metropolitan Opera from the early 1940s to early 1960s, and whenever a soprano crisis arose in the company Steber always seemed to be there to handle it. Among the roles which she created were those of Costanza in the Met's first production of Mozart's *Abduction from the Seraglio* (1946), the title role in the American premiere of Richard Strauss's *Arabella* (1955), the title role in Samuel Barber's *Vanessa* (1958), and the lead role of Marie in the American premiere of Alban Berg's *Wozzeck* (1959). She was the first American to sing at the Bayreuth Festival after World War II, having the role of Elsa in *Lohengrin* (1953), and it was she who commissioned and gave the concert premiere of Barber's *Knoxville: Summer of 1915* in 1948. The concluding pages of the autobiography give an excellent discography of Steber recordings, including new re-releases on compact discs. Many persons will have special interest in the new releases by Video Artists International of selections on video cassette from the Voice of Firestone programs. For many years Steber's name was almost synonymous with the Voice of Firestone, first on radio and later on television. Thus, it is possible for one to continue to study

Steber's performances and to savor her silky smooth soprano lines from the years when she was at her best.

As in any book of 268 pages there are some typos and a few factual errors. We have already noted a few slips in references to Wheeling at the beginning of this review. However, the editors at Wordsworth publishers should have caught some of the misspellings, although they might have missed such in references to proper names. Three such proper names misspelled are David Ewen (Ewan on page 80), music critic Paul Henry Lang (Lange on page 200), and the middle initial of Steber's revered teacher, William L. Whitney, is changed to an "F." in one of the photo sections. It is a mystery why references to Strauss's *Die Frau ohne Schatten* always capitalize *ohne*, since German titles capitalize only initial words and nouns. There are several other German words which are misspelled throughout the book, e.g. *mädchen* (page 28), *shön* (page 141), and *Weltschmerz* (p. 187), although these erroneous spellings do approximate the English phonetic equivalent for these words. Of course, these are minor details and in no way detract from the overall value of the book. The reader must remember, also, that Ms. Steber was writing from memory, and some events occurred as much as a half century in her past. Obviously this may result in a blurring of some details and dates. Nonetheless, from the standpoint of anyone wishing to gain insight into the operatic and concert world from 1940-1970 as well as to what made Eleanor Steber the *prima donna* that she was, this book is a veritable goldmine. It makes fascinating reading and paints a fine picture of a truly great West Virginian who never forgot her Wheeling roots.

Eleanor Steber: An Autobiography with Marcia Sloat
(Ridgewood, New Jersey: Wordsworth, 1992).
ISBN 0-9634174-0-1. \$29.95

and organist at Trinity Lutheran Church in south Wheeling, and it was there that her father met her future mother by joining the choir and volunteering to pump the organ. Eleanor writes (page 5), "There is simply no way to underestimate my mother's influence in masterminding my future. When I finally succeeded, mother relished the ovations and the trappings of my fame as if they were her own ... She was my greatest booster, my biggest fan and constant support ... I am aware how much of my strength and determination I owe to her."

Steber originally entered the New England Conservatory as a piano major, and it was there that she discovered that her foremost talent lay in the area of voice. Next to her mother, she gives the greatest credit for her success to her voice teacher at the Conservatory, William Whitney. It was Whitney who originally suggested that she change her major from piano to voice, and she credits Whitney with enabling her to develop a technique that became almost legendary while simultaneously enabling her to be able to sing a far greater number of roles than virtually any other soprano of her generation. Throughout her book Steber drops occasional tidbits of advice for singers, and since she herself in later life also was a teacher, any singers reading this autobiography would be well advised to take note of what she says. For example (page 23), "I cannot over-emphasize the importance for any child to have good early instrumental instruction, particularly piano or violin, long before the voice potential becomes evident. The voice is an instrument, too, of course, but the voice is 'us' and it matures so comparatively late that it's essential to start building the musical foundation long before." Another typical comment concerning vocal technique (page 214) says, "If the voice is properly focused and supported, it will cut through almost everything," including the lush orchestration of Richard Strauss and others.

Among the other insights which can be gleaned from her book are the many vignettes and references to some of the the biggest names in the musical world from the 1940s to the early 1970s. She sang with many of the greatest conductors and singers of that era, and in most cases her relations with them were quite amicable. Throughout the book there are numerous references to her stormy experiences with Rudolf Bing while he was general manager at the Metropolitan Opera. Persons in the Wheeling-Pittsburgh area will be amused at her experience with a then young and brand new conductor, Lorin Maazel, who wanted her to change her interpretation of "Non mi dir" from Mozart's *Don Giovanni*. Ms. Steber reports (page 222), "I had learned this role with Mr. Whitney, developed it with Wilfred Pelletier, Max Rudolf and Bruno Walter, expanded it in Chicago with Nicola Rescigno, and polished it with Karl Böhm, and now this novice was telling me how to sing it." Needless to say, she and Maazel did not get along very well! However, this incident was an exception to her normally smooth relationships with other artists.

Much of her book concerns her experiences and reactions to concerts and performances that were of special significance to her. It can be fun to look up what reviewers actually had to say about these events and to see whether their evaluations correspond with hers.

Sometimes they do, and sometimes they don't. For example, she states that the reviews for her Carnegie Hall Mozart concert of 13 April 1960 were "tremendous." However, writing in the *New York Times* for 14 April 1960, page 36, Harold Schonberg states, "Enthusiasm ran high. Miss Steber has a devoted following. But, truth to tell, it was not one of the popular soprano's best nights." Schonberg does add later, "Last night's audience was furiously for her. If this listener had his reservations, he seemed to be almost alone in them."

Certainly one of Eleanor Steber's most unusual moments occurred 17 January 1966 when she literally rescued the Metropolitan Opera's performance of Puccini's *Girl of the Golden West*. Steber was always known as a person who could handle almost any operatic crisis on short notice, but to step in on only two days warning to sing the lead for an ailing Dorothy Kirstein was heroic indeed, especially since her troubles with Rudolf Bing had precluded her singing with the Met for about three years. The moment when she made her initial entry that night was indeed memorable, for the audience roared its welcome upon her return, and for a while the production had to stop while she received her accolade. She describes this episode in a chapter entitled "The House that Roared," and by all accounts her performance was truly stellar under the circumstances—which included tenor Franco Corelli becoming too ill to sing after the first act, and a substitute tenor, Gaetano Bardini, being pulled from the audience to step in on an emergency basis. As Raymond Ericson wrote in the *New York Times* for 18 January 1966, page 33, "It was a gallant try on everyone's part, especially Miss Steber's. The soprano had been absent from the Met for three seasons, and when she made her spectacular entrance at the top of the staircase firing a pistol into the air, there was a roar from her admirers that could be paraphrased as 'Hello, Eleanor, it's nice to have you back where you belong.'"

In 1973 Steber announced a series of three solo recitals in New York's Alice Tully Hall, and these turned out to be one of the most successful series of events during her later career. John Gruen wrote a feature article on her in the *Sunday New York Times* for 18 February 1973 (section II, page 17) entitled "Will Destiny Give Steber Another Chance?" In her book (pages 251-252) she writes about this article, "It was a pretty vivid picture which painted some portions of my life in more graphic detail than anything ever printed before, so much so that I felt I had to warn my family. Far from being shocked, my mother responded, 'Well, it's true, isn't it?'" However, after checking Gruen's article one finds that it is not particularly shocking—just factual. These concerts were held 26 February, 26 March, and 7 May; reviews were quite glowing, and even Raymond Ericson of the *Times* had his review of the first recital sub-headed with "Soprano, at 56, Sings Lieder Softly and Makes Some Ravishing Sounds." As she writes in her book, "Would they have been more impressed had they known I was really 58?" For much of her career she kept her age two years younger than it actually was, and even today most standard reference works list her birth date two years after the event.

Eleanor Steber died 3 October 1990 at the age of 76, and she was buried next to her parents in Wheeling's Greenwood Cemetery

start that will jar Wheeling historians by stating that about 1706 Ebenezer Zane came to Wheeling (perhaps 1760 was meant, since Zane came in 1769) and that Fort Henry was named for Henry Clay (actually Patrick Henry). However, once these "screamers" are over the going is much better, and many readers will find it hard to put the book down once they have started, for the reading is smooth and entertaining.

Steber presents a truthful and well balanced picture of her life and career. She was unquestionably one of the great world-class sopranos of the entire twentieth century, and yet she admits to some of her faults—as with her drinking problems and her two failed marriages. As chair of the West Liberty State College Concert Series, this reviewer had only one brief personal contact with Steber, but everything that happened on that day and the personal reactions I had to meeting her and hearing her recital are reinforced when reading her book.

During the afternoon of 7 November 1966 I received a phone call from Steber, who was staying at her mother's home in the Warwood section of Wheeling preparatory to giving a recital at West Liberty that evening. She called to arrange a visit to College Hall, the auditorium where she was to sing, so that she could check the color of the stage curtains in order to decide which dress she would wear. She said that she would be at the hall in fifteen minutes, to which I replied that since the road from Warwood to West Liberty was very crooked and narrow she had better allow at least twenty minutes. Her immediate reply was, "Honey, I learned to drive on these roads; I'll be there in fifteen minutes." Exactly fifteen minutes later a big black Buick roared into campus and stopped in a little cloud of dust in the parking lot by College Hall where the science building now stands. Eleanor had arrived. It was also apparent that she probably had dared anyone to get in her way. This little incident capsulizes much of the picture Steber paints in her book—a portrait of a great artist who lived life to the fullest with a touch of the dashing and the dramatic, who was very confident of herself, and yet who wanted every detail of her work to be just right, even to matching her dress with the color scheme of the hall in which she was to perform. For this program in College Hall we also provided a white runner from stage right to stage center (much like the runners used for weddings) so that she could make her entrances and exits with the proper flair.

The evening she sang in College Hall on the West Liberty Concert Series also brought out another theme that runs throughout her autobiography, namely that she had such confidence in her superb vocal technique combined with a natural love for singing that she could perform with brilliance even when suffering from colds, exhaustion, or emotional stress. She had a cold when she appeared at West Liberty, but she instructed a music major how to brew a special blend of tea with honey and lemon, and this little backstage concoction kept her singing voice in working order, even when her speaking voice was somewhat husky. She said to me, "I wouldn't think of canceling or disappointing all my old friends and family who have come." She certainly did not disappoint, and while there were mo-

ments when an attentive listener might observe that she was covering for her slight indisposition, she gave a memorable recital—her last full-length solo recital in the greater Wheeling area—that deserved the standing ovation she received.

Her West Liberty recital was standard Steber, opening with a section of arias by Handel, Gluck, and Mozart, followed by Samuel Barber's "Hermit Songs." Then followed sections featuring works by Verdi, Debussy, and a medley of American folk songs. While not originally programmed, Steber inserted an excerpt from Menotti's *The Telephone*, and thereby hangs another tale. While she was singing I noticed that her long-time pianist, Edwin Biltcliffe, was flipping pages rather strangely as if there were all sorts of unusual cuts and repeats. Of course, he never missed a beat, and it sounded plausible—or reasonably so. Suddenly Eleanor turned to Biltcliffe, slapped her hand down firmly on the lid of the grand piano, and loudly asked, "What are those words? OK, let's start there!" She smiled at the audience, fluttered her eyelashes, and finished the excerpt with the audience literally "eating out of her hand" as if forgetting the words were all part of the act. Obviously when on stage she was ready to handle anything that might occur, and there was no question but that she possessed unique abilities to communicate her singing to an audience.

One other episode from her West Liberty concert was related to me by Harold Sacco, the music major who worked backstage during the recital and who now teaches music in the Marshall County schools. He stated that because of her cold, before each group of songs she would discuss with her pianist in what key he would play each of the selections. Of course, Biltcliffe would simply go on stage and play in the requested key regardless of what the music in front of him said. In her autobiography Steber does make a questionable musical judgment when she states (page 225) "there is no reason why this or any aria should not be sung a tone down or up." In a recital this statement is quite valid, and there is no reason why an aria or an excerpt can not be transposed to be more comfortable to the singer. However, in opera performances this is a much more questionable practice. Mozart, for example, carefully constructed his scenes and acts with attention to key relationships, and any changing of key can ruin these carefully crafted structures.

References to Steber's Wheeling roots occur throughout the book. Without question her family, and especially her mother, strongly influenced her development. Eleanor Steber's mother, Ida Nolte Steber, was herself an excellent singer, and there are frequent references in the book to the role that music played in her family life in Wheeling. According to the late Henrietta Arbenz Fulks, at one time Ida Nolte studied voice with Mrs. Henry J. Arbenz, who was originally an opera singer from Germany and taught voice at the Wheeling Conservatory on Fifteenth Street which her husband operated during the early years of this century. I have not been able to document any exact years of such study, but it seems quite likely, since both the Nolte and Steber families were active in Wheeling's German musical community. In her book Eleanor states (page 5) that Ida Nolte was soloist

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ELEANOR STEBER: AN AUTOBIOGRAPHY

By Edward C. Wolf

May Day, 1940 was a memorable day in Wheeling history. On the evening of that day a distinguished audience of fourteen hundred persons jammed the Virginia Theatre to welcome one of their own who had just won the Metropolitan Opera Auditions of the Air. It seemed that everyone wanted to attend the gala homecoming concert by Eleanor Steber, including West Virginia Governor Homer Holt, who had come from Charleston for the program. Since the Virginia was filled to overflowing and hundreds could not get tickets, arrangements had been made for her to repeat the concert the next evening in the Madison School auditorium. The Wheeling *Intelligencer* for 1 and 2 May 1940 reports that on the day preceding the concert (30 April) Steber was honored with a parade from the B & O depot through the downtown business district led by the Warwood High School Band and a long procession of public officials and local dignitaries. It was quite a homecoming! Noted Wheeling photographer George Kossuth chaired a civic committee to plan the homecoming events, and they added an extra-special touch by arranging with the Baltimore and Ohio Railroad to provide a rear platform observation coach to steam from the train yard into the station adorned with a big seal reading "Eleanor Steber Special" so photographers could take homecoming pictures. Actually she had already been in Wheeling for a day or two, but as she states in her autobiography, the parade through Wheeling was the real thing, with people jamming the streets and store windows and buildings displaying "Eleanor Steber Day" signs. And the concerts in the Virginia Theatre and Madison School were most definitely the real thing—being the first of sixteen annual "homecoming concerts" she was to give in Wheeling.

Wheeling residents will find Eleanor Steber's autobiography to be both fascinating and entertaining reading. The official title reads, *Eleanor Steber: An Autobiography with Marcia Sloat*. Sloat is a professional writer who assisted in compiling the book, and naturally it is difficult at times to determine whether one is reading Steber or Sloat. In her preface Ms. Sloat claims "every word in this book was spoken or written by, read and re-read, and edited by Steber; and every word was checked and researched with one or more confirming witnesses or written sources insofar as possible." While this claim may be true in general, it undoubtedly is an exaggeration. It is very unlikely that Steber ever read the final proofs, even when they were essentially finished in the mid-1980s. Otherwise she would have caught the reference to the "Warwick" (Warwood) High School Band on page 37 or to giving the location of the old theater near her Grandfather Nolte's grocery as being "Third and Eoff" streets instead of 33rd and Eoff (page 4). The first chapter gets off to a very rocky

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The *Review* publishes articles, documents, book reviews, and notes on the economics, political, social, and cultural history of the Ohio Valley area.

Authors should submit two, double-spaced copies of their manuscripts. Footnotes should be placed at the end of the manuscript. Materials should be addressed to Editor, *Upper Ohio Valley Historical Review*, West Liberty State College, West Liberty, West Virginia 26074. Neither the college nor the *Review* assumes responsibility for the facts and opinions expressed by contributors.

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a music variety program for television. Steel show alumni contend that the Welk show's program format and "family" orientation were directly descended from "It's Wheeling Steel."

Many more Steelmakers found positions with big bands and symphony orchestras. Drummer Eddie Johnston joined the Henry Busse band. Tenor saxophonist John Olszowy signed on with Tommy Tucker. Ernie Mauro played lead alto sax for Benny Goodman. Trombonist Mal Stevens performed successively with Ted Fiorito, Franky Masters and Fred Waring. Violinist Earl Summers formed a band of his own (which included several former Steelmakers) and later held first violin and concertmaster chairs with several of the region's leading symphonic orchestras including the Wheeling and Columbus Symphonies and the Pittsburgh Ballet and Light Opera.

Other cast members had relatively brief but significant engagements which transcended the show. As noted above, the Steele Sisters went on an extended tour with Horace Heidt and his "Brigadiers" in 1938. Regina and Sarah Rehm made brief appearances on network programs, based in New York and Chicago, respectively. Child star Carolyn Lee went to Hollywood and starred in a movie with Fred MacMurray and Madeline Carroll.¹¹ Most if not all of the additional steelmakers performed locally on an occasional or regular basis in Wheeling area bands, choirs and musical theatre for many years.

Further study will be necessary before we can begin to weigh the history. In the meantime, we must rely upon the testimonies of contemporary critics and broadcasters like radio pioneer George W. Smith who once wrote:

"Accepted chain commercial broadcasting practice was upset ... and industrial advertising history was made ... when men of steel became men of entertainment for 30-minutes each Sunday afternoon."¹²

NOTES

1. The group included several musicians who were veterans of the earlier "stogie show."

2. *NEW YORK TIMES*, Sunday, March 15, 1942.

3. The program was broadcast from the WWVA studio for only the first year. In search of a larger facility, with better acoustics and a live audience, the show moved first to the Scottish Rite Cathedral and later to the Market Auditorium, before finding a permanent home at the Capitol Theatre in 1939.

4. A harpist recruited in Iowa received a position in the advertising department along with her invitation to join the show as did the program's second "singing stenographer," Regina Colbert, who joined the show in 1938.

5. Family connections aside, most orchestra members were unionized professionals. According to *TIME* magazine (July 3, 1939), each musician received a weekly salary of \$38 in 1939. The salary rose eventually to \$65. All other performers were considered amateurs though they did receive modest payment for their participation. Employee headliners like the "Singing Millmen" generally re-

ceived \$10-\$20 per week over their regular wage, with no time off for rehearsals. Family amateurs like the "Steele Sisters" received approximately \$5-\$10 per broadcast. The result was a most economical program. While other half hour musical network shows cost as much as \$15,000 per week, "It's Wheeling Steel" ran about \$3,500, \$2,500 of which was spent on purchasing air time.

6. Lucille Bell, Kathleen Nelson and Lois Mae Nolte later joined by Harriet Drake.

7. Walter Shane and William Griffiths of the Musketeers along with weighmaster Will Stevenson and scale repairman Frank Nalepa.

8. *LIFE*, IV, 12, (March 21, 1938), 22-25.

9. According to an article in the *NEW YORK TIMES* (March 15, 1942), well over 1,000 performers appeared on the program during its eight season duration, and nearly 3,000 candidates auditioned annually.

10. *TIME*, XXXIV, 1, (July 3, 1939), 46.

11. "A Honeymoon in Bali," Paramount Pictures, 1938. The daughter of a company ceramics designer, Caroline Lee was actually discovered by a Hollywood producer in a Wheeling hotel. She did not appear on "It's Wheeling Steel" until after her return from filming "A Honeymoon in Bali."

12. "Listen to the Mill Whistle," (Mutual Broadcasting System, circa. 1939).

Wincholl, who was introduced to listeners as an "Old Timer of pure Scottish strain." Wincholl replaced Pat Patterson as master of ceremonies and before long "The Old Timer's" crisp burr became one of the most recognized voices in America.

"It's Wheeling Steel's" following on the Mutual network grew steadily as the months progressed. *RADIO GUIDE* noted that the show's network carriers had increased to 23 stations in October, 1938. *TIME* magazine placed the number at 27 nine months later.¹⁰

The *TIME* article was prompted by a momentous event in the early history of the show, a season finale performance broadcast live from the Court of Peace at the New York World's Fair on Sunday, June 25, 1939. Dedicated to West Virginia Statehood Day at the Fair which occurred on June 20th, the performance drew a record live audience of over 26,000. The cast was officially welcomed to the city by Mayor Fiorello La Guardia and hailed as the Pride of the Mountain State by West Virginia Governor Homer A. Holt.

Several weeks later, in honor of the program's many triumphs, Wheeling Mayor John J. Mathison declared September 12, 1939, "It's Wheeling Steel Day" in Wheeling. According to one reporter, "the entire town turned out" to help fete the Steelmakers with parades, exhibitions and various awards honoring the recognition that they had brought to the city.

After two more seasons as one of the most successful programs on the Mutual network, "It's Wheeling Steel" jumped to the larger NBC Blue Network in October 1941. The show's carriers increased in number to over 50 stations and its audience swelled into the millions. Grimes' most ambitious predictions had come true. Company morale soared and Wheeling Steel had become "public pals" with America.

Ironically, however, just as the program's advertising potential approached its summit, the company's need to promote its wares was virtually eliminated. On Sunday, December 7, 1941, "It's Wheeling Steel" was broadcast as usual from the Capitol Theatre in Wheeling. Only at the conclusion of the show did the cast and audience learn that the broadcast had been pre-empted nationally by news of the Japanese attack on Pearl Harbor.

For the next several years Wheeling Steel had an open contract with the United States Government to manufacture essential items for the war, including steel mats for landing strips, fins and carrier bands for bombs and all manner of famous Wheeling Steel "Red Label" pails, tubs, and garbage cans.

High level discussions within the company debated the future of "It's Wheeling Steel." Some executives favored cancellation or at least suspension of the program.

Others, with a greater appreciation of the broad esteem that the company had gained through the show, felt an obligation to continue the program and to dedicate it to supporting the war effort.

The latter camp won, and for the next several years the Musical Steelmakers projected a patriotic image of productive workers contributing to the war effort "in steel and song." Company advertisements were suspended from the program and the "Old Timer" began

to plug war bonds instead. The show went on tour, broadcasting live before crowds of servicemen, and performing special bond benefit programs.

A series of "Buy a Bomber" shows were nationally broadcast from selected West Virginia cities during the spring of 1943. Host communities were challenged to buy enough bonds to purchase a "medium bomber" at \$175,000, or better yet, a "Flying Fortress" at \$300,000. The planes would go into battle bearing the benefactor city's name. Programs in Parkersburg, Clarksburg, and Fairmont all handily exceeded their quarter of a million dollar goals. The final program of the series, broadcast live from the West Virginia University Field House in Morgantown, generated an amazing \$663,000, an average of over \$12 per county resident!

By mid-1943, "It's Wheeling Steel," had risen in popularity to fifth among all of the shows on the NBC lineup. In addition to airing over 84 American radio stations, the show was beamed overseas and into the trenches by short wave. Letters addressed to the "Old Timer" poured in from grateful servicemen around the globe. One G.I. pondered, "I wonder if all of you know how it made a lonesome man feel, somewhere out in the Pacific, when he heard the Steelmakers come over the air Sunday night?" Another writer, a Wheeling native, marvelled at the proliferation of Wheeling Steel products he encountered daily: "Can't get away from that old Red Label. They have several pails and G.I. cans right here in camp. When I tell them that I'm from Wheeling they invariably say, 'Oh yes, that's where that radio program comes from.'"

When "It's Wheeling Steel" entered its eighth season on September 26, 1943, over a 97 member station network, the show was at the height of its popularity. The eighth season, however, was to be its last. Surviving cast members offer varying analyses of the chain of events which caused the show to fold, but all agree that a major factor was the decline in health of John Grimes, the creator, artistic director and driving force behind the show. The final program, the 326th "original family broadcast," aired on June 18th, 1944.

As critics were fond of pointing out throughout the duration of the show, "It's Wheeling Steel" was a "pioneering experiment," not only in corporate relations and industrial advertising but in commercial broadcasting and popular music programming as well. Though no thorough study of the show's legacy has been conducted to date, it is likely that the program had enduring influences upon all of these conventions.

In fact, a considerable number of Musical Steelmakers went on to significant careers in music and broadcasting. Arranger and conductor Lew Davies found employment writing arrangements for Perry Como's "Chesterfield Hour" which was broadcast live from New York's famous Chesterfield Club. When the club closed Davies was hired by bandleader and recording industry mogul Enoch Light to help launch Command Records, the first high quality stereo record label to hit the market. Davies wrote arrangements for Command stars Tony Mattola, Doc Severinson and many others. During the early-50s Lawrence Welk asked Davies to assist him in developing

pany employee ensembles such as Lou Salvatore's "Noveltees" which appeared at events such as the annual National Cornhusking Championship during the mid 1930s. According to newspaper accounts, musical performances in the Wheeling Steel display tent at the championship each year literally "stole the show."

Grimes finally received approval to implement his plan during the summer of 1936. A contract was signed to broadcast the program over Wheeling's WWVA which was already well-known to local listeners for its country music program *The West Virginia Jamboree*.

Aided by WWVA program director Pat Patterson, Grimes' first job was to assemble an orchestra. Affiliation with Wheeling Steel was not initially required of orchestra members, though like the majority of Wheeling area residents, most local musicians had at least one relative who worked for the company. Grimes simply sought to engage the best talent available. His pool of applicants included mature musicians who had worked in theatre and movie house orchestras before the introduction of electronic sound, as well as a younger generation of dance band performers. After a lengthy series of auditions a group of sixteen was selected.¹

As the orchestra rehearsed, the search was begun for employee "headliners" — soloists and ensembles — who would provide the "amateur" and "family" flavor to the show. According to one report, employees "flocked in by the hundreds" to audition.² Among the first "stars" to emerge were "The Musketeers" (a mixed quartet comprised of tin mill worker Walter Shane, pipe mill clerk William Griffiths, and employee relatives Alice Foulk and Ethel Cheek), and a "singing stenographer" named Sarah Rehm.

"It's Wheeling Steel" made its debut at 1:00 p.m. on November 8, 1936, from WWVA's studio on the top floor of the Hawley Building in Wheeling.³ With the cooperation of WPAY in Portsmouth, Ohio, the program reached listeners up and down the Ohio Valley. The show's content consisted primarily of standard light classics, popular songs and show tunes, all performed from published arrangements, as well as narrative advertising often presented in the form of anecdotes about the people, history and contributions of Wheeling Steel. WWVA's Pat Patterson served as the program's first master of ceremonies.

As Grimes had predicted, "It's Wheeling Steel" caught on instantly with local listeners, especially within the Wheeling Steel family, because of its "homey" nature. Employees began immediately to refer to the program as "our show" and to Wheeling Steel as "our company." Even listeners who were not affiliated with Wheeling Steel felt a kinship to the show because of its local origins and its "plain folk" cast. Grimes responded by placing an even greater emphasis on the show's family slant.

During the show's second season, "It's Wheeling Steel" was billed as an "All Employee Broadcast." The role of company headliners was augmented, and an arranger, Maury Longfellow, was engaged to prepare original music. Grimes also sought to "firm up" the employee connections of the orchestra. Musicians with no link to the company either found or received one.⁴ In order to underscore the

band's "family" status, band members began to appear in employee headliner roles. The season premiere on September 12, 1937, featured saxophonist Verdi Howells, who announcer Pat Patterson noted was "employed in the machine shop of the Yorkville works."⁵

In ensuing weeks a succession of talented amateur headliners appeared on the show. Several, by popular demand, came back again and again. Especially notable were a trio of Wheeling high school girls billed as the "Steele Sisters"⁶ and a quartet of "Singing Millmen."⁷ Also introduced in 1937/38 was a series of "capsule classics" which familiarized listeners with the great works of classical music through two minute condensed versions arranged by the show's new arranger, Maury Longfellow.

"It's Wheeling Steel's" popularity grew steadily as the second season progressed. By December, with the local listeners in his pocket, Grimes was ready for bigger challenges. Persuading the company to purchase a half-hour test slot on the 17 radio stations of Mutual Broadcasting System network, Grimes groomed his production to jump from local to coast-to-coast fame. On January 2, 1938, the sound of the Musical Steelmakers was beamed from Maine to California.

The results of "It's Wheeling Steel's" national debut exceeded even Grimes' expectations; the program became an overnight sensation. Within days *LIFE* magazine dispatched photographer Alfred Eisenstadt to Wheeling to capture the essence of the new phenomenon in a pictorial expose juxtaposing photos of cast members in the mill and on the stage.⁸ Reviews of the programs and its novel origins soon appeared in *RADIO GUIDE*, *BILLBOARD*, and *VARIETY*. And in the months that followed, "It's Wheeling Steel" became a fixture on MBS. As its fame and popularity grew, so did the quality of the show's performances.

During the 1938-39 season a new arranger named Lew Davies joined the show. A native of Ashland, Kentucky, Davies was a graduate of the Cincinnati Conservatory of Music. Having formerly worked with the Tommy Tucker Band, Davies' arrangements brought the Steelmakers Orchestra to the cutting edge of the big band sound. In homage to the program and its noble goals, big band leaders like Tucker, Glenn Miller and others placed their original arrangements, and sometimes their singers, at the show's disposal. Paul Whiteman and Henry Busse offered their services as guest conductors. Robert Shaw dropped by to coach the chorus.

In addition to an ever changing slate of employee headliners who sang, whistled or accordioned their way to fame each week,⁹ a number of new "stars" emerged during the 1938/39 season. Among the most talented were soprano soloists Dorothy Anne Crow and Margaret Ellen Smith, tenor Arden White, and Regina Colbert who later teamed up with Harrison Frey, Paul Jones and Russell Howard to form the quartet "Jean and Her Boyfriends." During the spring of 1939 the "Evans Sisters" — Betty Jane, Margaret June and Janet — joined the cast to replace the "Steele Sisters" who were invited on an extended tour with Horace Heidt and his "Brigadiers."

Another 1938-39 addition was a 62-year-old payroll manager, John



West Liberty State Normal School, circa 1880s.

A typical class photo of the period in which the Hopedale Normal School "educated hundreds of persons who went forth to teach in elementary and high schools."

"It's Wheeling Steel; The Original Employee Family Broadcast"

By John A. Cuthbert

The blast of the Wheeling Steel mill whistle was a pervasive sound in the Ohio Valley during the late 1930s and early 1940s. Its call punctuated each working day, summoning thousands of employees to the workplace and marking time for all within earshot. The whistle had an entirely different meaning to those living beyond the confines of the valley, however. To millions of radio fans across America the whistle's call was a summons to entertainment, a shrill prelude to one of the nation's most popular radio programs: "It's Wheeling Steel, Featuring the Musical Steelmakers."

Billed as the "original employee family broadcast," "It's Wheeling Steel" began as an experiment in commercial advertising and employee relations. About 1930, Wheeling Steel's advertising director, John L. Grimes, speculated that it would be cheaper for the company to produce a weekly half-hour radio program for a period of one month than to take a single back page cover advertisement in the *SATURDAY EVENING POST*.

Grimes was, of course, not the first corporate executive to recognize the advertising potential of the new medium of radio. In fact, corporate sponsorship of popular radio programs was firmly established by the 1930s. Colgate-Palmolive, Bristol Myers, Purina and many other large corporations sponsored nationally broadcast half-hour shows like "Stop Me If You've Heard This One," with Milton Berle (Quaker Oats); "The Jello Program" starring Jack Benny (General Foods); and "Town Hall Tonight" with Fred Allen, Portland Hoffa, and Peter Van Steedan's Orchestra (Bristol Myers).

Smaller companies and organizations sponsored programs which aired locally in cities throughout the country. In Wheeling, the Stogie Makers Union sponsored a musical program which aired for 13 weeks over WWVA in 1932. The program ran an additional 13 weeks under the sponsorship of the Marsh Tobacco Company.

The program that Grimes had in mind had one fundamental difference from other corporate broadcasts. Instead of merely financing performances by professional entertainers, Grimes proposed that his show, a musical variety show, would feature the company from the start to finish. Wheeling Steel would provide not just the sponsorship of the program, but the substance as well. Central to his idea was the participation of the company's huge "family" of employees and their relations in providing low cost "amateur" entertainment.

Grimes' plan was initially met by company officials with considerable skepticism. Several officials questioned the effectiveness of radio in advertising products other than home consumables like toothpaste and oatmeal. Others had no desire to see the company go into "show business." The tremendous growth of radio during the 1930s and the popularity of musical performance that Grimes incorporated in other company advertising activities eventually changed their minds. Notable in the latter regard were performances by com-

again accepted election to the Board but died the following May 1.²⁴ His death contributed to the decline of Hopedale Normal College. It expired in 1895, although faintly revived 1899-1901. It could not meet the competition of the two other institutions of higher learning in Harrison County, Franklin College and Scio College.

Jane McNeely, an invalid through a great part of her life, supported Cyrus in all of his labor for McNeely Normal School and Hopedale Normal College. He wrote,

*My admirable wife ever stood by my side. She never deviated from supporting me in all my work for the School and College. She pondered on ways to obtain students. She thought of devices to advance the curriculum.*²⁵

Jane died on April 10, 1887, and was buried in the Donaldson family plot at New Richmond, Ohio. There Cyrus's remains were interred in 1890.²⁶ Their only children, two sons, had died young.

Cyrus McNeely may be considered a political anarchist. A knowledgeable source observed:

*His idea of direct responsibility to God for every word and act, led him to refuse to vote, or to assume any of the ordinary responsibilities of citizenship, his argument being that if he voted he thus became voluntarily responsible for the action of the majority, whether that majority should happen to be right or wrong. He thus decided to stand aloof, free from all wrongs committed by Government, answerable only for the actions and words of his individual life.*²⁷

In his unorthodox belief Cyrus enjoyed the firm backing of spouse Jane.²⁸

The lives of Cyrus and Jane McNeely represented altruism. Selflessly they served abolitionism, temperance, and the Disciples of Christ. Above all, they promoted teacher training. They contributed time and money to the founding and operation of The McNeely Normal School of Ohio and its successor, Hopedale Normal College. In the years 1856-95 these institutions educated hundreds of persons who went forth to teach in elementary and high schools.

NOTES

1. *Commemorative Biographical Record of the Counties of Harrison and Carroll, Ohio* (Chicago: J.H. Beers and Co., 1891), p. 110.

2. Cyrus McNeely, "Remembrances" (manuscript, n.d.), p. 19, Max Gard Collection, Lisbon, Ohio.

3. *Ibid.*, p. 27.

4. Charles A. Hanna, *Historical Collections of Harrison County in the State of Ohio* (New York: privately printed, 1900), pp. 252, 593, 594, 595, 600, 603, 604, 610, 612, 615.

5. J.C. Reed, letter to Reverend Alexander Campbell, Hopedale, Ohio, March 3, 1860, Gard Collection. Mr. Reed was a prominent citizen of Hopedale.

6. McNeely, "Remembrances," p. 41.

7. *Ibid.*, p. 42.

8. John Hancock, "The First Normal School in Ohio," *Ohio Educational Monthly*, Vol. 37, No. 6, June 1888, p. 242.
9. Reed, letter to Campbell.
10. E.L.C., "A Model School House and a Model School Man," *Ohio Journal of Education*, Vol. 2, July 1853, pp. 252-54.
11. Cyrus McNeely, "McNeely Normal School," *A History of Education in the State of Ohio: A Centennial Volume* (Columbus, Ohio: General Assembly, 1876), p. 290.
12. R.H. Eckelberry, "The McNeely Normal School and Hopedale Normal College," *Ohio Archaeological and Historical Quarterly*, Vol. XL, No. 1, January 1931, p. 91. For an account of this experiment see William F. Draper, *Recollections of a Varied Career* (Boston: Little, Brown, 1908), pp.9-22.
13. McNeely, "McNeely Normal School," p. 289.
14. "Proceedings of the Ohio Teachers Association," *Ohio Journal of Education*, Vol. IV, February 1855, pp. 33-34, September 1855, pp. 264-67.
15. Eckelberry, "The McNeely Normal School and Hopedale Normal College," p. 87.
16. Cyrus McNeely, "Hopedale Normal College," *Ohio Educational Monthly*, Vol. 37, No. 6, June 1888, p. 247.
17. Charles B. Wallace, *Custer's Ohio Boyhood* (Cadiz, Ohio: Harrison County Historical Society, 1987), p. 27.
18. *Ohio Educational Monthly*, Vol. 6, April 1857, p. 106.
19. *Ibid.*, Vol. 20, June 1871, p. 239; *Cadiz Republican*, June 1, 1871.
20. McNeely Normal School of Ohio, *Annual Catalogue*, 1859-60, p. 3, 1867-68, p. 3, 1868-69, p. 3; *Cadiz Republican*, August 12, 1870.
21. Minutes of the Trustees of Hopedale Normal College, July 21, 1879.
22. *Ibid.*, May 29 and June 7, 1886.
23. *Ibid.*, July 5, 1889.
24. *Ibid.*, June 16, 1890; *Cadiz Republican*, May 8, 1890.
25. McNeely, "Remembrances," p. 124.
26. *Ohio Educational Monthly*, Vol. 39, November 1890, p. 616.
27. *Ibid.*, p. 615.
28. McNeely, "Remembrances," p. 126.

males were not at home and Jane presented herself to the mob. She bravely faced it and addressed the crowd with such firmness that it inflicted no damage to the Donaldson property and left with cheers for Jane.⁸

Jane and Cyrus were quite compatible. They dedicated their lives to the promotion of human welfare. They became pillars of abolitionism in Harrison County, being noteworthy in the "Underground Railroad." They worked diligently for temperance, being standouts in the Harrison County Temperance Society.⁹ Above all, they devoted their considerable talents and money to teacher education.

Jane and Cyrus McNeely determined to improve rural schools. In their work they were joined by Mary Donaldson, Jane's sister, who lived with them, and later helped by Mrs. Eliza Hogg of Cadiz. They first attempted to secure the cooperation of the citizens of Green Township. They proposed that in each of the Township's four districts a model schoolhouse be erected and a school maintained which could serve as a model for other rural districts. Cyrus volunteered to pay half the cost for one in his district.¹⁰ The people of the Township declined support.

Thereupon the McNeelys decided to proceed on their own. In 1849, they bought a farm of two hundred acres in northeast Green Township, Harrison County, Ohio, which led to their founding of the village of Hopedale. Cyrus said that Hopedale became the name "almost by intuition."¹¹ However, it is possible that the choice of the name was influenced by interest in a religious communist experiment, 1841-56, in Hopedale, Massachusetts.¹²

In 1850-51, in the center of Hopedale, Ohio, the McNeelys erected a two-story school. In 1852, the school opened with three teachers. One teacher, George L. Work, M.D., was a graduate of Franklin College, New Athens, Ohio. In early 1854, the school collapsed because the local board of education and the community, wedded to the old routine of a country school, gave no support to the innovative endeavor.¹³

There followed the McNeelys' determination to continue the enterprise as a normal school. Mrs. Eliza Hogg erected a boarding house, Pumphrey Hall, to accommodate forty female students. Cyrus McNeely, needing outside support for the school, offered the school as a gift to the state of Ohio. The state refused the gift whereupon Cyrus offered the Hopedale property, including grounds, buildings, and equipment, valued at more than \$100,000, to the Ohio State Teachers' Association for normal school purposes on condition that it raise \$10,000 for support of the institution. In August 1855, the Association accepted McNeely's offer and incorporated the institution as "The McNeely Normal School of Ohio."¹⁴ It was the first institution in Ohio to use the name "normal school."¹⁵ Moreover, it was the first institution of higher education in eastern Ohio to admit female students. The board of trustees elected Cyrus McNeely president and George K. Jenkins, a graduate of Franklin College, New Athens, Ohio, treasurer. The school opened on November 26, 1855.

Cyrus and Jane McNeely worked fervently for the school. They erected at their own expense a model practice school building, suf-

ficient for one hundred children, with glass partitions to secure the necessary observation, and supplied it with all necessary furniture and apparatus. The Board of Education consented to the occupancy of the building for a few years on condition of joint control and joint expense.¹⁶

Among the students at McNeely Normal School of Ohio was George Armstrong Custer whose home at New Rumley, Ohio, lay near Hopedale. He enrolled for most of the first session from November 1855 through March 1856. He also attended the session from April 8 through July 27, 1856. One of his experiences at McNeely has been narrated:

*Hugh Speer told before his death of ... having roomed with Custer at Hopedale, the students living in small cottages on the campus. Custer was in the loft one night, trying to sleep, but some girl visitors below made too much noise. Unable to get them to leave, he stuck his feet and legs through the opening in the floor, as if he were coming down in scant dress. Needless to say, in those days, that was sufficient to cause a hurried exit of the girls, and to give him the desired quiet.*¹⁷

The McNeely Normal School of Ohio was highly successful from an educational point of view.¹⁸ However, the financial situation was very precarious. Two campaigns for state support failed as did the drive for subscriptions. The first year closed with an operating deficit of \$650 which was upped to \$900 in the second year's work. Cyrus and Jane McNeely bore the expenses for the third and fourth years (1857 and 1858). In 1859, the total indebtedness of the school and the *Ohio Journal of Education*, which was owned by the State Teachers' Association, amounted to over \$10,000. Cyrus and Jane McNeely assumed that burden. In 1871, Cyrus released the State Teachers' Association from its original pledge to raise \$10,000, and conveyed the property, free of encumbrance, to the trustees, on the one condition that there should always be maintained on the property a normal school for the training of common school teachers.¹⁹ The property was worth \$40,000. Cyrus McNeely maintained his interest in and support of the school, serving on the executive committee and sometimes occupying the position of "Superintendent" (business manager).²⁰

In 1878-79, the McNeely Normal School of Ohio was transferred to the First Congregation of Disciples at Hopedale and reorganized as Hopedale Normal College. (Cyrus McNeely shone as a prominent member of the congregation.) The congregation chose a board of trustees that then elected Cyrus McNeely as a chairman of the executive committee and William Brinkeroff president of the college (Brinkeroff had graduated at Franklin College, New Athens, Ohio).²¹

Cyrus McNeely continued his activity in Hopedale Normal College to the time of his death in 1890. He served on the Board of Trustees until 1886 when advanced age forced his resignation.²² However, his service to the institution did not abate. In 1889, he presented to the Board of Trustees a communication stating that during 1885-89 he had spent from his own funds \$1,000 in renovating, repairing, and cleaning up the buildings and grounds.²³ In January 1890, he

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