

Archives for old recordings

By JOHN WOLCOTT
Globe-Democrat-Copley News
Service

SEATTLE. — Nostalgic infatuation with America's past has produced a growing demand in recent years for old movies, music from the ragtime and big band eras and replays of old radio comedies and dramas.

But even before that nostalgia took hold, serious students of history and educators have been living in the past with the help of the University of Washington's "phonoarchives" collection of news broadcasts, speeches and other broadcast memorabilia.

"NINETY-FIVE per cent of our listening material is news and information rather than entertainment so the nostalgia craze hasn't affected us much with the public.

"But for educators and researchers, ours is the only extensive sound library in the nation that's usable," said curator Donald Godfrey, on the staff of the university's School of Communications, which has responsibility for the archives.

So unique is the library that requests for segments of its "history in sound" collection come from the Library of Congress, CBS and the BBC.

Godfrey said the collection is valuable for two reasons. First, transcripts of early radio network news broadcasts are rare because stations normally carried the programs live. Second, the university's collection is the only one that is usable because it is thoroughly indexed. The extensive collection of early radio broadcast recordings in the Library of Congress, by contrast, is still in boxes and little is known about their contents or condition.

IT WAS ONLY by an unusual combination of events that the archives were assembled, Godfrey explained.

To begin with, KIRO-CBS in Seattle had made transcriptions of more than 1,000 hours of network broadcasts between Sept. 7, 1939, when the German army marched into Poland, to April 2, 1945, when Allied forces crossed Germany's borders. They were recorded from New York City broadcasts so they could be replayed in Seattle at more convenient West Coast times.

Fortunately, Saul Haas, then president of Queen City Broadcasting, owners of KIRO, had a sense of history and preserved the metal and glass recording discs.

In 1956, when University of Washington Prof. Milo Ryan began searching for original broadcasts from that World War II era to fit into a television program soundtrack, his sleuthing uncovered the valuable discs in boxes stored in KIRO's transmitter building on Vashon Island.

KIRO management turned the entire collection over to the university and a \$10,000 grant to the School of Communications from CBS in 1957 financed preservation of the recordings, including money to record their historical sounds permanently on tape because the fragile discs themselves could only be played a few times.

There were 2,227 newscasts on the discs, by such men as Edward R. Murrow, H. V. Kaltenborn, Elmer Davis, Quentin Reynolds, William L. Shirer and Eric Sevareid.

They reported on events ranging from the Japanese attack on Pearl Harbor to the bombing of Japan; landing of Allied forces in North Africa; the invasion of Europe at Normandy; establishment of the World Security Council in 1945; V-E and V-J Day events; and the death and funeral of President Franklin Roosevelt.

Among the speeches by world leaders are 51 by FDR including his famous "Fire-side Chats," and 21 by Winston Churchill. Entertainment programs were few but included such classics as Frec Allen's "Allen's Alley" and "fibber McGee and Molly."

RYAN, WHO retired from the university in 1970, wanted the library to continue growing. In later years, KOMO radio in Seattle added substantially to the collection and the taping of contemporary broadcasts added speeches and interviews during the 1972 presidential campaign, the assassination of President Kennedy in 1963, and speeches by Presidents Kennedy and Nixon.

"Last year we helped ABC in their search for historical excerpts from radio broadcasts, finding one they wanted by Winston Burdett for a sound track for a television movie," Godfrey said. "We also provided 40 tapes of historical broadcasts to CBS for an education series being prepared on World War II."

No discs or original recordings leave the archives, which are kept in a temperature- and humidity-controlled room.