

# Eleanor Poehler – A Minnesota Radio Pioneer

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Few people today remember Eleanor Poehler. Like many of radio's early broadcasters, she is known mainly by those of us who are broadcast historians. That's a shame, because she was a unique woman, and a "first" in Minneapolis/St. Paul radio.

In order to appreciate what Mrs Poehler accomplished, you have to first go back to 1922. It was a year when radio was growing faster than anyone in the Department of Commerce (the agency that regulated radio prior to the FRC and FCC) had ever imagined. A year earlier, there had only been about fifteen commercial stations in the entire United States, and now in June of 1922, there were several hundred. It seemed every town wanted its own station, even though radio back then was a volunteer activity. Stations were not on all day – several hours in the evening was common, and some were only on a couple of nights a week. In 1922, you would have listened in using headphones, and you may have built your own receiving set. What you heard varied – some nights, there was poor reception and lots of static, as well as programming that sounded quite amateurish – because it was. But some nights, far away stations drifted in, and you could hear famous performers (comedian Ed Wynn was already doing radio, and he was not the only well-known comedian or vocalist to volunteer on this new medium). Most listeners were very patient – since radio was so new, there were no real expectations of consistent quality. People were excited to hear whatever came through the "ether." If it didn't sound good tonight, perhaps tomorrow it would sound better. Radio in 1922 was an adventure – it was in a constant state of flux, as stations came and went, and the ones that survived shared the limited number of frequencies the Department of Commerce had assigned.

Several stations were on the air in Minneapolis and St. Paul in 1922, but none of the call letters that people in the Twin Cities know today. These early stations included WAAH in St. Paul (which went out of business in September of 1922), WLB at the University of Minnesota (today KUOM), WBAH (owned by the Dayton Department store), and WBAD, owned by Sterling Electric Company and the Minneapolis Journal newspaper.

Eleanor Nesbitt probably did not realise when she was growing up that she would have a radio career. In fact, the young woman (who was born in Minneapolis in 1885)

was raised as most women around the turn of the century were – she would have been encouraged to do some singing or learn to play piano, and maybe she could teach for a while, but her main vocation was to be marriage and family.

Right after she graduated high school, Eleanor married a doctor, Frederick Poehler, and within a year, they had a son, Frederick Junior. Life seemed perfect; however, fate was about to intervene. Suddenly, without warning, Dr. Pohler died, and Eleanor was left a widow with a baby to support. She was only 21, and had been married for just 13 months. As might be expected, she sunk into a deep depression.

Fortunately, she had very supportive parents, and they reminded her that when she was a child, she had always loved music and had talked about singing professionally. They encouraged her to take some lessons and pursue her childhood dream. She found a very famous vocal coach, studied in both Minneapolis and in England, and was such a good student that soon she was able to perform professionally.

Her lovely soprano voice won her critical acclaim, and while she was not as famous as some of the internationally known opera singers, she was certainly popular with midwestern audiences. Her vocal skills helped her to get hired by Minneapolis's MacPhail School of Music, where she taught voice. A passionate lover of classical music and opera, she was soon speaking in schools and advocating for more music education. In 1922, Eleanor Poehler was not only a teacher and a performer; she was also a member of several women's clubs and did charitable work.

As mentioned earlier, radio in 1922 was staffed mostly by dedicated volunteers, many of whom came from the local music schools. And so it was that in mid-April of 1922, William MacPhail and Eleanor Poehler were asked to perform on WBAD, which was about to open for the first time. Like most of the early stations, WBAD depended on live performers – audio tape had not yet been invented, and playing phonograph records was a cumbersome procedure. Most of the early radio announcers were men – early microphones tended to distort the female speaking voice and make it sound shrill; but there were a few women announcers on the air, among them Eunice Randall in Boston, Jessie Koewing and Bertha Brainard in New York.

But the place where women WERE welcomed right from the beginning was as performers, especially vocalists. Vaughn DeLeath in New York was among a number of female singers whose careers were dramatically expanded thanks to radio. But, Eleanor Poehler was

probably not thinking about radio – she wanted to help Mr MacPhail, and she wanted to continue her mission to bring “good music” to as many places as possible. She sang on several radio stations in 1922 and from what I have read, her performances were very well received. But she was perfectly contented to continue on as a music teacher, singing at her church and doing occasional concerts. And then, once more, fate intervened.

WBAD was not named because of any aspersion on its sound – in those days, call letters were assigned in sequential order (WBAA, WBAB, etc) unless you requested a specific call letter. A few stations did – WGN stood for “World’s Greatest Newspaper”, referring to its parent, the Chicago Tribune – but most, including WBAD, took whatever call letters the Department of Commerce gave them. One problem early stations had was the cost – everybody wanted to build a station, but it was an expensive proposition to run one.

Few stations back then did commercials, so unless your owners had deep pockets, you made do with whatever you had. After only four months, beset by technical problems and probably having a hard time getting enough talent to perform, WBAD’s owners decided to get out of radio. By August of 1922, there was already a replacement for the station – a company that made radio receivers, Cutting and Washington, was ready to try its hand at broadcasting. The two men who owned the company knew they were not “radio people” – they needed to find somebody to run the station on a day to day basis. The station had a location – the Oak Grove Hotel; it had call letters – WLAG. All it needed was a manager, somebody to do what Station Managers did in those days – book the guests, persuade the performers to work for free, keep the station operating, and make sure the announcers were well trained and erudite.

C&W’s co-founder, Walter Harris, had been asking around the Twin Cities at various music schools, civic groups, and clubs. One name kept coming up as a person who knew music, was respected by musicians, and understood how a business works – Mrs Eleanor Poehler. While she did not know radio, she DID know business, having managed her own career and booked concerts for the MacPhail School. Further, she had another skill early radio needed – she could perform herself if a guest failed to show up.

Walter Harris was impressed with her background, and he called her up. He offered her the job as Station Manager of the new WLAG, and since the station was almost ready to go on the air, he gave her 12 hours (!) to decide. Several years later, in an article for *Wireless Age*,

Mrs Poehler recalled with amusement how surprised she was to receive the call. The opportunity sounded interesting, however, plus she was assured it wouldn’t take up much of her time. “So I took the position, which I was told would only be for three hours a day. After six weeks, I was at WLAG three quarters of the time.” (*Wireless Age*, December 1924, p. 30) It didn’t take long for Eleanor Poehler to be bitten by the radio bug: she gave up much of her volunteer work, left the church choir where she had been lead vocalist, and even took a leave of absence from teaching at the MacPhail School. Her life became centered around managing WLAG, and she threw herself into her job.

The new station took to the air on 4 September of 1922, at 830 kHz (360 m.), a frequency shared by many of the early stations. At first, as was common back then, WLAG broadcast only two or three evenings a week, but by year’s end, it was on the air nearly every night; in late February of 1923, WLAG began publishing its own weekly program log and magazine called “Listenin’ In”, which was sponsored by a number of local businesses. By the spring of 1923, you would have found WLAG at 720 kHz (417 m), sharing time on that frequency with the Dayton Company’s WBAH.

If we use today’s standards for what Mrs Poehler did and what she believed, we might come away feeling she was just another fanatical conservative who wanted to preserve the ‘good old days’. But we have to examine what she accomplished in the context of life in the early 1920s. It was the “Jazz Age”, and radio was already in the middle of a controversy – should the airwaves be used for “good music” and for education or should they be used for popular music and entertainment? To Mrs Poehler, and to a number of others, including the famous inventor Lee DeForest, the true purpose of radio was to teach culture to the masses, to uplift them and introduce them to the classics.

That was Mrs Poehler’s deepest hope – that she could use WLAG as a vehicle to develop in her audience the same love of classical music and opera that she had. She was very outspoken about her dislike for jazz and popular music. Her commitment was to give the WLAG audience the finest music available. She even insisted on showing respect for the music – announcers were told to wait a full 10 to 15 seconds after the final note of any selection before they were allowed to speak. During the time that Mrs Poehler ran WLAG, she won very positive mentions in several magazines, including *Radio Broadcast*, where columnist Jennie Irene Mix praised her for creating such an excellent station. Said Miss Mix, “Mrs Eleanor

Poehler, director and chief announcer of station WLAG has been sufficiently successful in her work to bring her many commendations from radio fans far and near . . . She has created several popular radio stars [in the upper midwest] since she took over WLAG. Anyone regularly listening to her programs can readily see that she is... affording the radio public opportunities to hear enough good music to gratify those who already appreciate it, and to create a taste for it among those who, hitherto, have listened to little but trash.” (Radio Broadcast, August 1924, p. 334-5)

I would like to tell you that Eleanor Poehler’s crusade was successful, but winning an entire audience over to classical music and opera in the middle of the Jazz Age was an up-hill battle, to say the least. Making her task even more difficult, the owners of WLAG found that running a station was a severe drain on their finances, and in mid 1924, beset by the problems many small stations of that era had, Cutting and Washington abandoned radio; in fact, the company ended up bankrupt. The station known as “The Call of the North” was off the air at the end of August. Today, except as the ancestor of heritage station WCCO, WLAG is seldom remembered. Meanwhile, in September of 1924, the Washburn-Crosby Company acquired what had been WLAG, and WCCO, “The Gold Medal Station”, was born. (The WCCO call letters referred to the initials of the parent company, while the slogan referred to Gold Medal flour, made at the company's mills).

Because of her extensive experience, Eleanor Poehler was hired by the new owners to work in their music department as Musical Director. Her chief announcer at WLAG, Paul Johnson, was also hired. And while she did not run WCCO, Mrs Poehler still booked guests and arranged performances. But it was obvious to her that WCCO’s management did not share her passion for educating the audience to “good music”. She returned to teaching music at the MacPhail School, and in 1927, she left Minneapolis for Seattle, where she lived out her remaining years till she passed away in September of 1949.

What I find interesting about Eleanor Poehler’s life is how she overcame personal tragedy and took a chance on an entirely new industry, commercial broadcasting. At a time when few women held positions of authority anywhere, she became one of the first female radio station managers; she hired and trained staff, arranged performances, and maintained the station’s philosophy while giving numerous talks on the importance of music education. Even though her interest in classical music was

well known, she made sure the station broadcast a variety of services to the audience, including college sports, farm and market reports, and children's programs. She was certainly one of the first women announcers in the upper mid-west, and while she never turned opera into a household word, she proved that women could do a lot more in radio than just sing an occasional song. For that alone, she deserves our thanks.

The Minnesota Historical Society was very helpful to me as I did the research on Eleanor Poehler's life – they shared several interesting articles with me, as well as giving me access to “Who’s Who Among Minnesota Women” (1924 edition). Other resources used for this article included back issues of Radio Broadcast, Wireless Age, the Minneapolis Journal, the Minneapolis Star, and a book about WCCO’s first 50 Years by Williams and Hartley -- “Good Neighbors to the Northwest.” My thanks also to the Pavek Museum in Minneapolis for letting me see several issues of WLAG's magazine, "Listenin' In" as well as assorted memorabilia from WCCO.

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