

Louis William Kaiser

May 12, 1906 — December 18, 1981

Louis William Kaiser was called to Cornell at a time when radio was becoming an increasingly important tool in adult education. Pioneering work of some twenty years in the use of radio in agriculture and home economics had preceded him here, but he was not a stranger in these areas. Because of the growing sophistication of radio, the need was felt for someone with broad experience and knowledge to direct and develop the educational programs.

Kaiser came out of the world of commercial radio in 1945 to become assistant professor and head of radio services in the newly created Department of Extension Teaching and Information (now the Department of Communication Arts). This was a joint department of the Colleges of Agriculture and Home Economics. Behind him were sixteen years of broad experience in radio broadcasting and administration.

He served Cornell and the people of New York State for twenty-five years through his courses in radio and television and his extension radio services, helping students prepare for and develop their careers in broadcasting, and as faculty adviser for Cornell's student-owned and operated radio stations, WVBR-AM and WVBR-FM.

His interest in radio developed early. He recalled staying up late many nights as a boy, listening clandestinely to broadcasts. It was a thrill in those days to hear from such far-off places as Pittsburgh, Chicago, and Charlotte, North Carolina.

Though born in Cortland, New York, Kaiser's formative years were spent in Syracuse, where the family had moved and where he attended the New York State College of Forestry for two years. He was later to complete his education through night courses and on weekends at Ithaca College, where he received the degree of Bachelor of Fine Arts in Television and Radio in January 1949.

His professional career began in 1927 as an announcer at WSYR, Syracuse, and he was soon advanced to chief announcer and studio director. An early achievement was the development of an agricultural radio program featuring the county 4-H clubs. In 1930 he moved to Buffalo as chief announcer and program director of WBEN, where he originated, produced, and announced a daily farm program over a period of six years. Local farm leaders and extension staff participated, providing a steady, reliable voice for agriculture in western New York. This was an innovation for radio in those days because most farm programs were devoted solely to weather, crops, and market reports.

When the *Buffalo Evening News* became affiliated with WEBR in 1936, he was named station manager to reorganize and train the newly acquired staff. On completion of this assignment he was made director of the combined WBEN-WEBR radio news service.

The challenge of putting a brand-new station on the air brought him back to Syracuse in 1940 as manager and program director of WOLF, where he employed and trained a complete radio staff. He left the station in 1942 to enlist in the United States Army Air Corps as a 2nd lieutenant, serving as special service officer at Muroc, California. Honorably discharged in 1944 with the rank of captain, he reentered the broadcasting field as a supervisor at WFBL in Syracuse.

From this post he joined the college faculty to become, in addition, extension radio specialist and radio farm director of the Cornell-owned stations, WHCU-AM and WHCU-FM. In his various capacities Kaiser was responsible for the production of radio programs for farmers and homemakers of the state and for special manuscript services to extension agents.

Effectiveness of this work is indicated, for example, in a 1948 report showing radio briefs sent twice weekly to forty stations and sixty-eight thousand letters received in one year from listeners requesting one hundred twenty-seven thousand Cornell bulletins. Operational advice during the crop season and tips for stations giving daily weather forecasts were typical features. Over seventy stations cooperated at various times.

A survey conducted several years later among farm broadcasters and county agricultural agents indicated that stations across the state annually gave more than three thousand hours of radio time to agriculture. The operation headed by Kaiser involved tape-recorded programs to some one hundred stations and agents; a weekly syndicated manuscript service to the stations; an exclusive weekly script on commercial farm-subjects to agricultural agents; and a comprehensive monthly script featuring Cornell research to all the state's broadcasters.

During his career he arranged for several nationwide broadcasts from Cornell by the three major networks—CBS, NBC, and ABC—and participated in each. In the late 1940s, when television was relatively new, he helped to plan programs over WRCB-TV Schenectady—one of the first stations in the state to televise regular farm and home programs. As other television outlets developed, he enlisted cooperation.

Lou was concerned with keeping up in the technology of the communications industry and advanced the transcription service by more personalized attention to the individual stations. He also made early use of one-camera closed-circuit television, tape recorders, and videotape.

Kaiser had a good relationship with students, supportive of the view that personality is part of the magic of teaching. He guided students on field trips to stations where they could observe inner workings and behind-the-scenes operations by the professionals. As faculty adviser to WVBR, he provided advice and counsel to students for almost two decades. In appreciation the Cornell Radio Guild presented to him a plaque, the first citation of its kind in the Guild's thirty-year history. Some of his advisees and students in the radio writing and broadcasting courses became farm program directors and managers of stations in New York and elsewhere.

Among other awards, one of special meaning came in 1962 from the National Association of TV and Radio Farm Directors for "thirty-five years of service to agriculture through farm broadcasting." He was a charter member. Kaiser also held memberships in two radio-affiliated national fraternities—the Collegiate Iota Beta Sigma (a life member) and the honorary Alpha Epsilon Rho.

A kind, warm, and friendly person, he had a broad range of interests and hobbies. He enjoyed sports as both a participant and a spectator and was a competent bowler in the University league. He liked to fish. He collected stamps and coins. Over a span of twenty years he compiled a list of post offices and postmasters of New York State in the period from 1789 to 1850. Some of this research was done in the National Archives in Washington, D.C.

But by far his most compelling hobby was as a bibliophile. He became a specialist in local and regional history and western Americana. His three-thousand-volume collection contained numerous rare first editions, including the original orderly book of General Marinus Willett, who defended the Mohawk Valley against British troops in the Revolutionary War. He also owned letters written by George Washington and Thomas Jefferson and other documents.

Kaiser retired in 1970. He and his wife spent their last years together in a Cortland nursing home. His wife predeceased him by about two years.

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