

Rockefeller Family Support for W1XAL/WRUL, “Boston’s Vest-pocket BBC”

By William J. Buxton

Professor, Communication Studies
Concordia University
1415 de Longueuil
Quebec City G1S 2G2
Canada

buxton@alcor.concordia.ca

© 2009 by William J. Buxton

Editor's Note: This research report is presented here with the author's permission but should not be cited or quoted without the author's consent.

Rockefeller Archive Center Research Reports Online is a periodic publication of the Rockefeller Archive Center. Edited by Ken Rose and Erwin Levold. Research Reports Online is intended to foster the network of scholarship in the history of philanthropy and to highlight the diverse range of materials and subjects covered in the collections at the Rockefeller Archive Center. The reports are drawn from essays submitted by researchers who have visited the Archive Center, many of whom have received grants from the Archive Center to support their research.

The ideas and opinions expressed in this report are those of the author and are not intended to represent the Rockefeller Archive Center.

I spent July and August of 2004 as a scholar-in-residence at the Rockefeller Archive Center, doing research on the support of Rockefeller philanthropy for the study and practice of educational radio. Within a few days of my arrival, I was saddened to learn of the death of Laurance Spelman Rockefeller (born 1910), who was one of the two surviving sons (along with David Rockefeller) of John D. Rockefeller, Jr. I was also informed that -- as is the case with the death of any Rockefeller family member whose papers are held by the Rockefeller Archive Center -- the papers of Laurance Rockefeller would now be open to researchers. As I have always found Laurance Rockefeller to be an intriguing figure -- well known for his activities as a venture capitalist, an aviation pioneer, a conservationist, not to mention his later forays into UFO research -- I began to examine his papers with a view to understanding the extent to which he may have been involved in educational radio. It became almost immediately evident that not only was Laurance Rockefeller a long-time supporter of educational radio, but his activities in this area over the years provided a window into the evolving relationship between private family interests, philanthropic practices, and the rise and fall of an innovative yet highly controversial

venture in radio broadcasting, namely the experimental educational radio broadcaster W1XAL. (In 1939 the experimental status was abandoned, and the station was assigned the call letters WRUL, which stood for “World Radio University Listeners”). Accordingly, I used Laurance S. Rockefeller’s papers as a point of departure for examining other collections that contained material on the emergence and development of W1XAL/WRUL.

The station was the brainchild of Walter S. Lemmon (1896-1971), a radio engineer who worked for IBM. Lemmon had become aware of radio broadcasting’s educational potential when, as a member of Woodrow Wilson’s entourage to Paris in 1919 on the *George Washington*, he was responsible for the radio-telephone service that was used. Initially, the progress of the peace conference was broadcast from the ship. Later on, Lemmon convinced President Wilson to make further broadcasts to the United States on the return voyage. During the following decade, Lemmon became increasingly involved in the development of radio technology. He invented and patented the Single Dial Tuning Control (now standard for radio receivers), which made him independently wealthy through his large annual royalties from RCA. Drawing upon these funds, he founded W1XAL, an experimental short-wave radio station dedicated to educational broadcasting. Lemmon was able to procure two licenses for the station in 1929, and began broadcasting in 1931.

In 1935 he approached the Rockefeller Foundation (RF) for support, and was invited to submit a proposal by John Marshall, assistant director of the Humanities Division (HD). The application was successful, and a grant-in-aid of \$25,000 was awarded for 1935 (grants-in-aid of \$40,000 beginning in 1936 and of \$100,000 beginning in 1938 would subsequently follow). However, in order to receive funding, Lemmon was obliged to form the World Wide Broadcasting Foundation (WWBF) that would administer the grants-in-aid and oversee the broadcasting activities of W1XAL. The RF officers were of the view that the WWBF could serve as a prototype for educational broadcasting. In particular, it was hoped that the station (given its private, yet non-profit status and commitment to serve the public) would play a mediating role in the bitter aftermath of the divisive Communication Act of 1934, and would help improve relations between the government, educational broadcasters, the private sector, and the universities. Viewed as a “vest-pocket version of the BBC,” it was at the center of an effort to help develop educational broadcasting on an international basis, occupying a unique place within the HD’s emergent program of communication and serving as a nucleus for an inter-related set of

initiatives. (John Marshall, the assistant director of the Humanities Division, took a personal interest in the activities of the WWBF, and was even a member of its listening club. When he traveled abroad he tuned into the station using his portable receiver and informed Lemmon about the quality of reception. Marshall also passed on to Lemmon letters that he had received containing information about reception).

However, by the late 1930's, the RF officers began to get cold feet about the initiative. It had been hoped that the station would become financially self-sufficient through private donations and listener support but the bulk of its funding still came from the RF. To make matters worse, Lemmon refused to provide financial figures and the administrative structure of the WWBF was in a shambles. Its board neither met regularly nor had much influence. There was, moreover, compelling evidence that the station had strong biases for both the Church of Christ, Scientist (of which Lemmon was a member) and IBM (of which he was an employee).

These concerns triggered a close review by the HD of the WWBF and the station that it administered. A study by Paul Lazarsfeld and a smaller survey by Lloyd Free revealed that the audience was not only quite miniscule, but was largely comprised of Christian Science followers. The technical capacity of the station was found to be wanting, with reception quite patchy. A visit by Marshall to Boston in 1939 revealed that the station's organization was weak, which was reflected in a decline in its programming. Accordingly, it was decided that the HD would no longer support the WWBF's experimental work in developing educational broadcasting; its grant-in-aid was allowed to run out at the end of 1940. Lemmon pleaded to the end for an extension of his funding but to no avail.

While the station continued on for another twenty years, it never was able to establish itself as a major force in educational broadcasting along the lines that the RF had hoped for. In 1942, along with a number of other educational broadcasters, it was "leased" to the Office of War Information, becoming, in effect, a propaganda station for the duration of the war. While it regained its independence in the post-war period, it became much more beholden to private business interests for its support, with less attention given to the dissemination of educational and cultural programs to a general public. Lemmon eventually sold the station to Metro Media (affiliated with the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-Day Saints) in 1960.

An examination of WIXAL not only provides insights into the communications and radio programs of Rockefeller philanthropy, it also sheds light on how the patterns of giving by

funding agencies and family members shifted from 1935 to 1955. Initially, the support for the station by Rockefeller family members blurred with that provided by the Rockefeller Foundation. Indeed, the officers of the Humanities Division contributed to this blurring. The Director of the HD, David Stevens, brought Lemmon to the attention of John Rockefeller Jr. (Junior) in 1935, “mentioning the fact that the organization is under support by the Rockefeller Foundation and suggesting that Mr. Rockefeller might like to meet Walter Lemmon sometime.” Junior wrote back to Stevens, indicating that he indeed would like to meet Lemmon. It was through Junior that Lemmon was introduced to Junior’s son, Laurance. Subsequently, Lemmon used Laurance as a point of entry for securing donations from other family members. He was also careful to make appeals to what he thought was of importance to family members. Abby A. Rockefeller (Mrs. JDR Jr.) was persuaded to make a donation that was specifically linked to the station’s furthering of international peace. Along the same lines, John D. Rockefeller 3rd pledged \$750 to the station so that it could broadcast programs from International House, a cause for which he was a major supporter. The following year, after consulting with Arthur W. Packard, legal counsel for the Rockefeller brothers, he gave an additional \$500, with the understanding that this was to be the final amount. Moreover, Junior himself was enticed to donate through the Davison Fund, a small philanthropy that had been established in 1934 to allow him (aided by Packard, the Fund’s administrative director) to consolidate his private giving.

Moreover, when it became evident in the late 1930’s that the WWBF had not been able to develop financial stability, Laurance approached a number of notable figures on Lemmon’s behalf, such as prominent investor and businessman, Maurice Wertheim. Laurance was well aware that the future financial stability of the station would depend on private giving once the RF funding ran out. To this end, in 1939 Laurance guaranteed a \$20,000 loan (at 4.0%) from the Chase National Bank to the World Wide Broadcasting Corporation. It was not paid back until 1945. As noted in a memorandum on the WWBF from 1949, “the files contain a great deal of correspondence with the Bank and with Walter Lemmon over the dilatory way in which the WWBC was amortizing the loan.” In the following year, Laurance made a contribution of \$2000 to cover the cost of a survey by Raymond Rich to determine the feasibility of raising \$40,000 to \$60,000 for the WWBF.

Laurance’s support for both the station and the WWBF was not confined to helping them become more financially secure. He also contributed to their institutional development by

bringing Lemmon into contact with a number of prominent individuals and organizations. On one occasion, Laurance provided Lemmon with a list of prominent people (including William Benton, Henry Luce, Joseph Ravensky, and Beardsley Ruml) who could be invited to a WWBF-sponsored luncheon. Laurance also introduced Lemmon to Jay Downer, one of eleven members of the Board of Rockefeller Center, Inc. Downer subsequently became a member of the New York Advisory Board of the WWBF. (Indeed, Laurance served on the Board as well, resigning once he entered the armed services). In addition, Laurance helped Lemmon find a full-time director of the WWBF and assisted him in arranging broadcasts in cooperation with Princeton University. Given his expertise in technological innovation (an interest that he shared with Laurance), Lemmon was able to reciprocate. He not only advised Laurance on various schemes (such as a desalination plan for seawater), but catered to the young Rockefeller's growing interest in aviation by including an aviation course in the station's World University program.

However, shifts in the orientation and activities of Rockefeller family members beginning in the late 1930's ultimately created strains in the relationship that had developed between Lemmon and Laurance. Above all, with the formation of the Rockefeller Brothers Fund in 1940, Arthur W. Packard's influence on how family members made their donations became even more pronounced. As manager of the new Fund, Packard was charged with consolidating the brothers' donor activities in the interests of efficiency. (In this capacity, his point of reference was a document of priorities and criteria for giving that he had drawn up in 1937). This meant, moreover, that those requesting funds were subject to increased scrutiny. This did not bode well for Lemmon, whose less-than-stellar financial operations had become well known to Packard through the latter's role as informal advisor to family members and administrator of the Davison Fund.

Events during World War II did little to salvage Lemmon's reputation. He was asked by Nelson Rockefeller, who had become head of the newly created Office of the Coordinator of Inter-American affairs, to assist in the program of broadcasting to Latin America. This involved having a studio in the International Building at Rockefeller Center. However, the deal fell through, and Lemmon was not able to pay the rent (of around \$500 per month), which was \$2,990.89 in arrears. While the debt was forgiven in 1944, the dealings with Lemmon seemed to have not only alienated both Nelson Rockefeller and Hugh S. Robertson (the vice-president of

Rockefeller Center, Inc.) but made Packard even more suspicious of Lemmon and his broadcasting venture.

Hence, when Lemmon approached John 3rd for additional support in 1944, Packard advised the latter not to provide further donations. According to Packard, “Lemmon is not only a pressing person, he is a presuming person, and we have had various difficulties in dealing with him.” He noted further that “the whole enterprise is in a rather dominating fashion controlled by Lemmon... a one man show with a small, enthusiastic, but relatively speaking non-functioning Board of Directors to meet the requirements of the set up legally.” Moreover, when Lemmon requested funding from the Rockefeller Brothers Fund (now directed by Laurance) after the war, Packard strongly recommended that the radio entrepreneur’s request be rejected. Lemmon also asked for funding from the International Basic Economy Corporation (IBEC) headed by Nelson Rockefeller. The request was referred to Packard, whose recommendation was that “the letter be sent to file without answer.”

Lemmon’s weak record of financial management likely played a role in his lack of success to garner significant post-war funding. But the reorganization of family giving along more rational and bureaucratic lines undoubtedly sealed his fate. Indeed, reflecting the concern that Lemmon would continue to solicit funding, a detailed memorandum of all his dealings with Rockefeller interests was prepared, providing detailed evidence of his misdeeds and transgressions. Its goal was obviously to discourage Rockefeller family members from providing Lemmon with financial support. Largely ignoring the admonitions from Packard’s office, Laurance continued to give as an individual, but made no further effort to have other family members follow suit and declined to rejoin WWBF’s Advisory Committee.

One can reasonably conclude that W1XAL/WRUL fell short of the expectations held by many that it would become a major force in educational radio. Its struggles to achieve financial solvency never ceased, and it finally exited from the broadcasting scene without much fanfare. However, the station is of great historical significance, because it served as a central rallying point for educational radio in the United States from 1935 to 1940, a period during which public broadcasting had largely been written off as impractical, if not impossible. To this end, it was an important point of reference for a number of important initiatives in educational broadcasting, including exchanges with the BBC, the use of radio for cultural programming by the Pan American Union, audience studies by the Princeton Radio Research Project, innovative

programming by the Chicago-based University Broadcast Council, and the adaptation of Basic English for use on the airwaves. It should, of course, be emphasized that all of these ventures were funded by the Humanities Division of the Rockefeller Foundation. As such, they provided the basis for the RF's most ambitious project in educational radio, namely the Rocky Mountain Radio Council of the 1940's, which in turn provided the platform for the emergence of organized educational broadcasting in following decade. The role played by the RF and the General Educational Board (GEB) in the development of public radio in the United States has long been recognized. But what has largely escaped notice is the extent to which Rockefeller Foundation officers worked in tandem with Rockefeller family members to strengthen educational radio through the support of W1XAL. To be sure, the total amount of \$26,500 donated by family members (Laurance contributed \$20,000, while Nelson, John 3rd, Abby, and Junior – through the Davison Fund – contributed \$6,500 altogether) was modest compared to the \$158,000 contributed by the Rockefeller Foundation (all of the original \$165,000 allotted to the WWBF was evidently not used). But it was likely the case that the show of support by Rockefeller family members – when coupled with the support by the RF itself – encouraged others (such as the Sloan Foundation and the Carnegie Corporation of New York) to provide donations. And by virtue of the access to the family's network that accompanied the financial support, Lemmon was able to not only make his radio initiative better known to members of the economic and educational elite, but to draw attention to educational broadcasting as a whole.

In effect, what made the rapid rise and recognition of W1XAL/WRUL possible was the blurring between Rockefeller philanthropy and Rockefeller family activities that was endemic in the 1930's. Within this freewheeling ambiance in which philanthropic activity was not clearly demarcated from personal and family initiatives, a venture capitalist like Laurence Rockefeller was able to generate support for what was for all intents and purposes a risky – yet promising -- endeavor. Conversely, the slow decline and ultimate demise of Lemmon's educational-radio venture can be attributed – at least in part - to the increasing rationalization of the “citizen-giving” of Rockefeller family members, as embodied in the Rockefeller Brothers Fund under the watchful eye of Arthur W. Packard.