

Teacher, Writer, Radio Personality's Words Live On In History Center Exhibit

Donna Eschenbrenner, January 25, 2014



Photo caption: Barbara Hall is pictured here in the late 1940s during the early years of her career in radio.



Photo caption: Barbara Hall loved to travel and was photographed on one of her many trips – this one to Scotland in 1984.

Science teacher, radio personality, and world traveler, Barbara Hall was a trailblazer, an example of what women of persistence could do in an era when women's roles were circumscribed in many ways. Originally from Groton, Barbara Hall graduated from Groton High School in 1939 and from Cornell University in 1943 with a major in bacteriology and science teaching. She began her career as a science teacher in Lyndonville High School in the Ontario County apple country. In an interview with the Ithaca Journal in 1981 she said, "This town had the world's largest applesauce factory and I'd supplement my salary by picking apples." That energy and work ethic were to serve her well all her life.

After teaching for three years she moved to a job as a science writer for the Science News Service in Washington DC. At the same time, she said, “I also tried my hand at radio, writing continuity [the spoken part of a radio script that serves as introductory or transitional material] – and that did it. I knew then and there that radio was for me.” She returned to Ithaca in 1947 and began a decades-long career with WHCU, first as continuity director, then as women’s editor for Rural Radio Network, a WHCU affiliate. By 1953 she was back at WHCU and later became director of women’s programs. She hosted a weekly travel show, interviewing hundreds of people from all over about their journeys. She retired from the station, to great acclaim, in 1987.

It was when she was just starting out with her radio career that she was asked to write a promotional piece about the Community Ambassador Project for the Experiment in International Living. This was a program developed to encourage greater understanding among the various peoples of the world, and they collaborated with local State Community Service Councils to choose volunteers to travel to Europe to live with native families. As one press release put it, “The mission of these unofficial representatives . . . will be to learn about the lives of people in communities abroad . . . and to tell citizens of European nations what things are like over here. . . . Each ‘community ambassador’ will go abroad with a camera and with a program to send a weekly or semi-weekly story on his experiences to his community in New York.” In 1948 Barbara was chosen to represent Ithaca. She spent that summer and the next living with a family in Espergaarde, Denmark, and writing extensively for the Ithaca Journal (and letters to her family) about her experience. Her observations on Denmark and Danes in the post-World War II era are particularly insightful. Her polished and professional articles for the Journal differ from her chatty, relaxed letters home, but only in tone – her basic point is the same: Denmark, to her, was an amazing country, and the Danes were a warm and admirable people who were working hard to recover from the terrible privations of the war.

Ithaca Journal, July 12, 1948. Once a year Espergaarde turns its harbor over to the local sailing club for the 'Harbor Feast' – a modified midway which raises money for the upkeep of the harbor....and there I saw real community fun. One monstrous thing which resembled a merry-go-round, and a chair swing were the only 'midway rides,' but there were many games of chance. The prizes in those games wouldn't have received a second look from Ithaca youngsters, but they were much sought after even by the older folks of Espergaarde. One lucky shot from a gun, for example, might reward one with a penny box of Chiclets or a tiny piece of chocolate. The wheel of chance which offered oranges for prizes was the most popular, for oranges were even more scarce than chocolate or American cigarettes. While folks back home laden themselves with cupie [sic] dolls, big hams, cartons of cigarettes, and beautiful Bingo prizes from the county fairs, the folks of Espergaarde are very happy to receive a smelly cigar or a bottle of mineral water from the Harbor Feast.

She wrote her family on July 13, 1948:

Dear Mom & Warren & Grandma & Elsie,

...Do you suppose you could send Fru Nielsen a package?... It took all this time to find out what she needed – and she insists on paying for it – so mail the bill to me in a letter and I'll pay you, but I don't think I'll take the money from her. She needs: Coffee... tea...chocolate (Hershey Bars), seedless raisins, small box corn flakes (she loves them and can't get them here), 2 pink slips, 1 white nylon slip...2 pair panties (pink), 2 pair nylons size 8 ½.... Coffee and tea are needed the most. Hope this isn't too much trouble for you....I'll pay you when I get home. If you happen to be in Rothschilds, get the nylon mesh stockings – they don't run so easily. You could put them in an envelope that's easy to send....Oranges,

tangerines, etc. are impossible to get, but they would be too hard to send – maybe you could put a tangerine in the side or something.

This trip fostered her lifelong interest in traveling, a love she indulged with trips all over the world. She often combined work with pleasure by bringing her tape recorder with her to places like Peru (traveling on a banana boat), Greenland (on a Russian ice breaker), the Galapagos (on a three-masted schooner with a group of British scientists), Australia, Antarctica, to mention just a few of the places she had been. She shared stories and insights about them all on her travel show with her listeners.

Her last broadcast was in 2007, and she died in 2011, at the age of 89. The History Center has recently received a donation of the late Barbara Hall's personal papers, including her memorabilia and letters from her time in Denmark. They offer a wonderful look at the life of an extraordinary Ithacan. The can be seen in our research library any Tuesday, Thursday, or Saturday, from 11:00 to 5:00.

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