

## TWO FRIENDLY FARMER STATIONS

Tucked away in the hills of southwestern Iowa, in a veritable garden spot, lies Shenandoah, a little city of big things. Surrounded by a rich agrarian district, it draws its wealth from the unusually black and fertile soil that has rendered Iowa an outstanding agricultural State. Many of Shenandoah's industries are derived from small grain, corn, fruit, and livestock grown there; and from the development of these activities the name of Shenandoah has spread across the land until it has become known as the seed, nursery, and hatchery center of the United States. Although it has a population of only slightly more than six thousand eight hundred, it boasts the largest nursery and seed companies in the United States.<sup>1</sup>

Far away from the hustle and bustle of city life, four tall towers rise high into the air — three from the outskirts of the city and one from the business center. At night, red gleams of light illuminate these radio towers KFNF and KMA, the radio stations of the KFNF Broadcasting Company and the May Broadcasting Company, respectively.

Long before the people of Shenandoah had heard of radio, Henry Field had begun building the foundation of his widely-known seed company on a nearby farm. When Henry was five years old he made his first sale of fifty cents' worth of garden seeds to his aunt. As he grew older, he became more and more interested in the seed business. When he was twenty, he was known as the owner of the best truck garden in the neighborhood; gradually he built up a business of selling seeds to his neighbors who insisted

<sup>1</sup> William H. Graham's *KFNF Just for Old Fashioned Folks* in *Radio in the Home*, September, 1924, pp. 17, 18.

upon having "the same seeds as Henry used". In 1899 he turned the front room of his four-room cottage into an office, his barn into a seed-house, and printed his first four-page catalogue.<sup>2</sup>

In comparison with his later business, his progress was slow during the first five or six years. Henry Field had, however, found himself and he rejoiced in the kind of work he had long desired to do — something in connection with a truck gardener's business which he and his wife and hired man could handle in the evenings.

As the years passed, his personality, as expressed in his catalogue and other publications, became recognized not only in Page County but in nearby counties in Iowa, Nebraska, Kansas, and Missouri. People liked his homey colloquialisms and his friendly manner. Because he cultivated a plain and informal style similar to that used by the people who read his catalogue, farmers felt that they knew him. Since people like to deal with persons they know, his business increased. In the catalogue, which was soon enlarged to sixty or seventy pages, he began to run pictures of his family, of his children, his wife, and himself; he even told details of his family life which interested his readers. Sprinkled through the pages he included pictures of lima beans, carrots, roses, peonies, and other nursery stock. On the very first page in all his catalogues Henry Field writes a letter in which he takes all his readers into his confidence by telling them of his every-day philosophy. He is entirely in earnest when he says, "I wish you could come and sit across the desk from me here and talk about that garden and the rest of the things you are going to do this year."<sup>3</sup> In this way he has retained the people's confidence — a prime requirement in the sale of seeds.

<sup>2</sup> Henry Field's *Seed and Nursery Catalogue*, January 1, 1941, p. 1. p. 4.

<sup>3</sup> Henry Field's *Seed and Nursery Catalogue*, January 1, 1941, p. 1.

In 1913 he began the publication of a magazine called *Seed Sense* which is published three or four times a year. People are interested in it, for it contains pictures of customers at work and play, of Mr. Field's family, and of the seedhouse. It also includes newsy articles on planting, seeding, and housing which help his customers find uses for more of his products. *Seed Sense* is mailed to all customers who have purchased goods from him and to other persons who write and ask for it.

During all these years Henry Field's business has continued to bear the imprint of his personality. Letters to customers have followed forms prescribed by Mr. Field. They were to be friendly, short, complete, and expressed in what Mr. Field describes as "Missouri English",<sup>4</sup> which, interpreted, means the commonest word one can use to express himself clearly. He encouraged people to feel at home with him. Customers in turn wrote long letters to him about their families, themselves, and their gardens or farms. These letters usually brought large orders, and his business grew by leaps and bounds.

In 1924 KFNF was born. Mr. Field had written to many radio stations and asked them to play more old-fashioned music, but they seldom complied, and he decided to provide it himself. People laughed when he suggested a radio station and tried to argue with him and to tell him how very expensive it would be, but he was determined and soon KFNF was on the air.

The very first night Henry gave his neighbors and the rest of the world something to think about when he announced in his friendly, pleasant drawl the policy of his station: "This is to be a station where old-fashioned music is to predominate. I believe there are enough of us in the world old-fashioned enough to enjoy old-fashioned tunes

<sup>4</sup> Henry Field's *Common Sense in Letter Writing*, p. 2.

and the old-fashioned hymns. We are going to give you music you heard around the old family organ before jazz was thought of."

Mr. Field also explained, "This radio idea first struck me after I bought a receiving set. At every station I heard those raggy, jazzy tunes, and I wondered if people didn't really get tired of that sort of music."<sup>5</sup> Many people today ask him how much it cost him, and he replies, "Plenty — but not too much. It's worth every cent I invested in it," and in a public-spirited fashion he adds, "It's worth it to my business and to Shenandoah." Moreover, Mr. Field has held to his policy. Today KFNF is famous as a station still featuring old-fashioned music, talks, and programs.

Henry Field pioneered in using the radio as a means for advertising. He felt that his radio listeners would be interested in some of the products he had to sell. Because of this, he received much criticism from other radio men and dealers; people laughed and said the scheme would never work. It did prove successful, however, and the sale of his products increased year by year. A list of some of the items sold over the radio in 1927 when business by this medium was just coming into its own indicates his success: 55 carloads of tires; 60 carloads of paint; 490,000 pounds of coffee; 44 carloads of field seeds; 20 carloads of dried fruit; 51,000 radio tubes; 204,000 yards of dress goods; 60,000 pairs of ladies' hose; and 21,000 suits.

All Mr. Field had to do was to mention, in his "Missouri English", that he had just arranged to sell overalls — three pairs for five dollars — and orders began to pour in by telephone, wire, and mail until he was sold out for six months in advance! The evening seed business of the late nineties had grown up.

<sup>5</sup> Graham's *KFNF Just for Old Fashioned Folks in Radio in the Home*, September, 1924, p. 17.

A story indicative of Henry Field's spreading popularity deals with his birthday party of KFNF about 1927. The station had a special program for Mr. Field and asked for telegrams; five special operators were provided to take the messages when they came in. The results were quite beyond expectation; the operators at Shenandoah and in other towns were swamped for hours. When the lines became jammed, agents from other towns jumped into their cars and brought the messages themselves. When the celebration ended 250,000 telegrams had been delivered.<sup>6</sup>

In 1930 came the depression. Mr. Field's company, too, was caught with a big stock of merchandise which was declining in value every day. Mr. Field answered the challenge by printing his catalogue in black and white, instead of in expensive process colors, and saying quite frankly across the cover, "Back to Calico Again". But there were changes not due to the depression. Radio had become common. KFNF had been one of ten or twelve stations in the country which sold merchandise; it now had hundreds of competitors, and people no longer responded as heartily as formerly to Mr. Field's advertising. The novelty had worn off.

After the depression Mr. Field slowly began to build back his seed and nursery business. Today as one of the largest mail-order houses in the country for garden seeds, field seeds, nursery stock, and baby chicks, the Field Seed Company has few formidable rivals. The company serves more than a million customers who live in every State in the Union and in many foreign countries. Each January five hundred thousand catalogues are sent out. In March, the same number of copies of *Seed Sense* follow the catalogue. In April and September additional catalogues and

<sup>6</sup> As reported by Marvin Teget, Secretary of the Henry Field Seed Company, in a business letter to the author.

magazines are issued, making a total mailing list of some two million mail pieces. In 1940, 317,000 letters were received asking all sorts of questions from "How do you plant spirea?" to "Please tell me all about how to run a farm." The postage bill of the company is approximately \$75,000 a year. The company has large tracts of land which are used for the production of hybrid corn, for growing nursery stock, and for raising purebred hogs. Mr. Field employs from four to six hundred people and KFNF has a full, balanced schedule of programs and a power of one thousand watts.

These facts and figures become more significant after one has read through several days' mail and gotten the "feel" of what Henry Field means to customers all over the country. His correspondents place great confidence in him. There are frequently apologies because orders are small. People write that they feel that they know Mr. Field as if they were neighbors and would not buy from anyone else. They ask for all kinds of planting information and then try to follow it. Customers make great efforts to induce their friends and neighbors to order from Mr. Field. They send in blank checks and tell Mr. Field to fill them out and send them whatever seeds and plants he thinks they need. Every one of these requests is conscientiously answered and every effort is made to adjust any complaint to the customer's satisfaction.

Henry Field has always been interested in children — perhaps that may be due to the fact that he has eleven himself — and frequently throughout the years has published helpful pamphlets for them about everything from letter writing to etiquette. One of Mr. Field's pet hobbies is his Junior Seedsmen's Club. Twenty years ago this organization developed out of Mr. Field's theory that children should learn to do business while still young. Mr. Field

sends to all children who write him requesting membership a box of packaged seeds. He instructs the children to sell the seeds and to keep one-third of the money and return the other two-thirds, or return all the money and receive a gift. This is all done on the honor system, and the club has now between ten and fifteen thousand members. One resides in equatorial Africa.

Another of the interesting features of KFNF centers about the religious department conducted by Reverend James Pearson. Before the recent marriage laws took effect, he made a specialty of conducting group marriages free of charge. The ceremony was broadcast over the radio. He has performed between fifty and sixty of these weddings, the average number of couples participating being seven or eight to a group. The largest mass wedding was composed of fourteen couples. Mr. Pearson has also conducted the Sabbath school service every Sunday morning for the last sixteen years and leads the week-day morning devotions.

If a company ever had customers who considered themselves part of one big radio family, that company is Henry Field's. Each year his seeds and nursery stock are shipped to every State in the United States and, in peace times, to some thirty-four foreign countries. The radio station is now owned by KFNF, Inc., with Mr. Field as manager. The name means much to many people. They believe they know him well, and they have the utmost confidence in him.

But Shenandoah has not only a single friendly radio station. Let us turn to the other company mentioned earlier in this article — the Earl May Seed Company. Like Henry Field's Seed Company the Earl May Seed Company started from a very small beginning. In 1915 Earl E. May, a young man who had found the practice of law too dull for his active mind, came to Shenandoah and connected himself with the Mount Arbor Nurseries which were under the

direction of E. S. Welch. Probably he could not have found a better place to get a thorough nursery training and he soon decided that he wanted a seed and nursery business of his own. He was not long in organizing the company which now bears his name.

Twenty-five years ago, on January 1, 1919, Mr. May took over the old Armstrong Seedhouse with the design of starting a seed, nursery, and landscaping business. He could hire only two people for his office staff, and together they spent many toilsome hours preparing catalogues, writing letters and soliciting potential customers. Today Mr. May chuckles when he recalls how a large eastern advertising agency in New York laid out the first selling campaign and how they vainly tried to sell seeds to the farmers with clever mottoes, flowery advertising phrases, and many other advertising stunts that were considered very effective in those days.

The growth of the business was gradual. Mr. May often had to depend more on his indomitable courage and faith than on the actual business increases. Almost single-handed he took care of the business the first few years, filling orders, managing correspondence, and all the time wondering how he was going to pay the bills for the catalogues and advertising. At first it was an uphill fight, but Earl May had courage and ability. The policy of giving service in a prompt, efficient way and supplying only quality nursery stock and seeds gained the company added customers and friends each year, so that the volume of the business grew slowly but steadily.

In 1924, when radio was considered as a hobby, or at best a means of entertainment, Earl May, like Henry Field, realized that it could be used as a means of education and publicity in order to bring to the attention of thousands of people interesting facts about planting and landscaping



and the care of ornamental trees, fruits, and flowers. His first programs were presented from Omaha, over WOW. For these early broadcasts Mr. May took talent from Shenandoah to the Omaha studio. Later in 1924 he built a special studio in the May Seed Company building and through the Omaha station transmitted his programs sixty-six miles by wire. The results of these early broadcasts were so gratifying that Mr. May immediately began planning his own station. On August 12, 1925, operating at that time on a wave length of 252 meters with a power of five hundred watts, KMA broadcast its initial program.

Earl May's idea of using radio to broadcast useful information as well as entertainment became extremely popular. He created so great an interest in planting and gardening that almost a million names were added to his mailing list, and his nursery and seed business showed a phenomenal increase. While Mr. May gives radio ample credit for making thousands of people planting-conscious, his own personal ability at the microphone proved a tremendous factor. In two years he built up a coöperative spirit of good will by the service program that is well defined by KMA's slogan: "Keep Millions Advised."<sup>7</sup>

Mr. May was soon receiving so many inquiries from customers who desired to purchase various items in addition to seeds and nursery stock, that he decided to include a line of staple foods such as dried fruit, canned fruit, fresh frozen fish, citrus fruit, buying them in carload lots and applying the efficient merchandising methods to this business which had succeeded so well in the seed and nursery business. In those years one reason for the surprising growth of the company was Mr. May's ability to adapt radio as an advertising medium to the peculiar needs of his own business.

<sup>7</sup> *Earl May Seed Company Grew from Small Firm to Great Institution in the Earl E. May Seed Company Special Edition of The Evening Sentinel (Shenandoah), January 27, 1937.*

KMA's first studio consisted of one room on the second floor of the seed building on North Elm Street, Shenandoah. After he had polled over 450,000 votes in the Announcers' Contest, and won the Radio-Digest-Gold-Cup Award for the world's most popular announcer, Earl May decided to build a home for KMA. It was finished in the fall of 1927, and thousands of people came to see the beautiful auditorium called Mayfair. Designed in Moorish architecture, its auditorium seats one thousand people. The studio is in full view from the auditorium, separated from it only by a huge piece of plate glass, eight by twenty-two feet in dimensions, and weighing three tons in its steel frame.

In radio Earl May was a leader, not a follower, and many of today's common practices of radio were in use at an early day in his programs at Shenandoah. For example, the now popular audience-participation type of radio program was developed by him back in 1926 and 1927 at a time when most broadcasters were trying to keep people out of the studios. Early morning broadcasts were unheard of until he inaugurated the first regular program of its kind on October 30, 1925. A program which started at five-thirty in the morning achieved a success that surprised everyone but Mr. May. Regular news broadcasts from press wires were instituted by him in 1928.<sup>8</sup>

In contrast with most broadcasters of the day, Earl May developed the informal style of radio program, inviting the opinions of the listeners and making his broadcasts serve as a "clearing house" for ideas and problems. With his unusual radio voice and his ability to describe in an interesting manner, he started to give word pictures of agricultural conditions, methods, and people which the audience present and those "listening in" can understand.

Up to 1930, about ninety per cent of the Earl E. May

<sup>8</sup> Private records of KMA.

Seed Company business was mail order, but improved highways made it possible for more and more people to drive into towns to do their shopping in person, so as an experiment an Earl May Store was established in Lincoln, Nebraska. The success of the new store was immediate, and now twenty-five to thirty Earl May nursery and seed stores are located in various towns and cities throughout Iowa, Nebraska, and Missouri. Thousands of tons of merchandise, seeds, and nursery stock are shipped every season to these Earl May stores.

From a volume of a few thousand dollars in 1919 and 1920, the business has grown to a present day volume of about two million dollars.<sup>9</sup> At the height of the season, the Earl E. May Seed Company employs approximately five hundred people. The quantity of merchandise distributed through this organization reaches staggering figures. For example, the sale of oranges and grape fruit runs between sixty and eighty cars per season. About three million baby chicks are sold each spring.

KMA has also grown and developed. It is now a corporation in its own right, doing business as the May Broadcasting Company. It is affiliated with the Blue Network, Inc., and with the Mutual Broadcasting System. It operates full time, on a frequency of 960 kilocycles, with 5000 watts day and night time power. New RCA equipment was installed in the summer of 1936, insuring the highest perfection in tone, quality, and clear reception. KMA's 488-foot tower was the highest self-supporting structure in the State of Iowa at the time of its erection in 1936. The control station is housed in a two-story white frame building located north of Shenandoah on highway number forty-eight. A full-sized basement under the house supplies space for an air conditioning plant, garage, and heating unit.

<sup>9</sup> *The Evening Sentinel* (Shenandoah), January 27, 1937.

Living quarters of the engineer are located on the top floor, while the main floor houses the modern broadcasting equipment. The programs originate in the studio at the downtown auditorium at the main building of the Earl E. May Seed and Nursery Company. The new control station and transmitter house were built at a cost of \$83,356.00. Expenses of the radio department average between \$9,000 and \$10,000 monthly. Radio, as an advertising medium, is undoubtedly here to stay, and the phenomenal growth of the Earl E. May Seed Company furnishes one example.<sup>10</sup>

Each year Earl May features the KMA Radio Jubilee. The idea was born on October 30, 1925, on the occasion of KMA's Australian "DX program". Plans had been laid in advance for a continuous thirty-six hour broadcast featuring special talent and entertainment, and in the wee small hours, special portions of the program were dedicated to far distant points such as Australia, New Zealand, and Alaska. Listener-interest was aroused to the extent that several hundred people crowded the studios and the adjoining offices to see the entertainers and learn just how broadcasting was handled. Refreshments were arranged for the entertaining and radio staff, but many of the listeners who had come from some distance were invited to join in and visit with Mr. May and all the personnel. The next year, plans were made to serve pancakes to all the visitors through the coöperation of the Doud Milling Company of Denison, Iowa. In this way a new feature was introduced.

The name "Radio Jubilee" was coined that year and special entertainment features were added including games, contests, and special prizes for the radio visitors from the most distant points. In 1928 close to 100,000 visitors swarmed into the studio, auditorium, offices, tents, and tem-

<sup>10</sup> "KMA's New Station Makes It One of Best in Middlewest" in *The Evening Sentinel* (Shenandoah), January 27, 1937.

porary space reserved for the occasion. For the refreshment of guests 138,624 pancakes were served in a tent across the street from the Mayfair Studio. Nine hundred pounds of sugar and 308 gallons of cream were required for the coffee to go with the pancakes and 611 pounds of butter and 500 gallons of syrup were used on the pancakes. In addition, 2490 pounds of bacon, 1475 pounds of prunes, and 1000 packages of cereal were served.

This gives an idea of the magnitude of the task when one tries to feed 100,000 people in four or five days.<sup>11</sup> In the thirties the Horticultural and Vegetable Show was added as a special feature of the Radio Jubilee and this has since come to be one of the outstanding shows of its kind in the Farm Belt. Comments have been made by judges, some of them from Iowa State College at Ames, that the exhibits at this show rival those of the State Fair in quality as well as quantity.

Station KFNF occasionally has its jubilee week at the same time as KMA, during which it, too, has special entertainment features and serves "hot dogs" and coffee to thousands of visitors. Other communities have their carnivals, their rodeos, and their celebrations, but Shenandoah has its Radio Jubilee, an institution thoroughly in keeping with its slogan "The Radio City" of Iowa, which speaks far and wide the reputation of Shenandoah as a trade center.

Besides developing their own commercial interest the stations also serve the public in many ways. For example, in welfare work KMA not only maintains a welfare program director, but performs a consistent year-around service. One of the staff provides daily programs for shut-ins and underprivileged listeners. In the years in which Mrs.

<sup>11</sup> *KMA's Annual Radio Jubilees Inaugurated October 30, 1925*, in *The Evening Sentinel* (Shenandoah), January 27, 1937.

Edythe Stirlen has held this post, she has built up an organization of thousands of charitable persons who aid her in this work of brightening the hours of shut-ins. These persons have joined the SOS (Send Out Sunshine) Clubs and contribute time, work, or money to enable Mrs. Stirlen to provide wheel chairs, radios, spectacles, clothing, and other items to worthy cases. In 1940, for example, she gave away 10 wheel chairs, 200 radio sets, 15 radio batteries, 10 pairs of spectacles, 8 typewriters, 3 hospital beds, 6 pairs of blankets, and 500 baby chicks.<sup>12</sup>

In addition, quantities of garden seeds, heating pads, Bibles, clothing, and furniture were supplied. These SOS clubs, with a membership of 2500, are active in Omaha and Lincoln, Nebraska, Topeka, Kansas, St. Joseph, Missouri, Marshalltown and Ottumwa, Iowa, Rush City, Minnesota, and other middlewestern cities. The *SOS Signal* is published in connection with the clubs; this is a monthly magazine which has a regular circulation of one thousand copies.

The stations have also done much to bring about cultural development in the Middle West. Because of them Shenandoah has become garden-conscious and boasts of an unusual number of fine lawns and gardens. The whole town works towards the annual spring flower show in which the townspeople and the stations enter lavish exhibits including peonies, iris, roses, shrubs, and house plants which attract huge crowds from the surrounding States.

The two stations carry many news broadcasts, religious services, educational and home economics programs, market and service reports; and devote much time to humanitarian campaigns, such as the Red Cross, 4-H Clubs, Boy Scouts, and public school affairs. Among some of the prominent speakers have been Henry Wallace, James Farley, Governors of nearly all the midwestern States, and Billy

<sup>12</sup> Private records of KMA.

Sunday. All the programs of both stations are arranged for the people of the Middle West and are designed to bring them not only the necessary information concerning their farms and gardens but also the type of entertainment they will most enjoy.

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SHENANDOAH IOWA