Uncle Ab From Abington — November 5, 1975

There was a time in the early part of this century that the rural farms were much more isolated than they are now. The population was smaller and farm families spent their evenings at home since it was too far to go to town and there wasn't anything to do there anyway. In the 1920's radio came upon the scene and this new medium of entertainment became one of the important factors in American agriculture.

Since the population was largely rural, pioneer broadcasters realized there was a large specialized audience out there on the American farms. And so, large blocks of air time were set aside for farm programming. Market reports, detailed weather forecasts and other farm items were of major interest in early day radio.

In addition, some stations became almost totally identified with the farmer. WLS in Chicago was, for many years, owned and operated by Prairie Farmer. However, before that time, it was put on the air by Sears, Roebuck and Company, the World's Largest Store — hence the call letters. Sears Roebuck had an agricultural foundation which was dedicated to the education and service to the Midwest farmer. When radio came along, it seemed an obvious supplement to the agricultural foundation's operation. Naturally, Sears promoted their mail order business to a large degree, and sold radios and other items to promote their radio station. As a result of this publicity. Sears became known as basically a farm supply company and an examination of their early catalogs indicates this trend. WLS also brought entertainment to this ol' Hoosier Farmer (and his neighbors across the state line) on winter evenings. Names out of the past, some of whom have become household words today, include George D. Hay, the Solemn Old Judge; Gene Autry. George Gobel, Pat Buttram, Lulubelle and Scotty, The Rev. John Holland, and many others.

The WLS National Barn Dance was first broadcast April 19, 1924. This was while Sears Roebuck still owned the station. The rather stuffy management of Sears frowned on this type of program but the response from the countryside was overwhelming. This program finally went off the air in August of 1957, one of the longest running programs geared to farm audiences.

Today this Ol' Hoosier Farmer listens to what radio and television have to offer and wonders if perhaps, he and his brother farmers aren't broadcasting's forgotten man. Compared to the old days, they are indeed.

By Jim Jones