

Ruth Lyons and Stories

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Ruth Lyons: Basics

- Born: (Ruth Evelyn Reeves) Cincinnati, Ohio - October 4, 1905 – November 7, 1988 (84 years).
- Credited with inventing Day-Time Television.
- Hosted a daytime television program that was the top rated in the US from 1952 to 1964.
- Throughout her broadcasting career she never read from scripts, even after moving to television.
- She was the only performer who could ignore the Crosley rules about adherence to program scripts and commercial copy.
- She became the only woman on the Crosley Board of Directors.
- On stations: WKRC, WSAI, WLW and WLWT .

Story 1: (Brand)

Ruth Lyons had two trademarks which were concealing her microphone in a bouquet of flowers and the white gloves she and her studio audience wore while singing "The Waving Song", as they waved to the viewers at home.

Story 2: (Community)

The Ruth Lyons Christmas Fund began on her birthday (October 4) in 1939. Her radio program was a platform to create a fund that provided hospitalized children with toys during the season. Additionally, she wrote Christmas songs that were performed live and recorded to benefit the charity. In 1996 the name was changed to the Ruth Lyons Children's Fund to create awareness that the charity was not just seasonal. It has raised tens of millions of dollars.

- Wrote a musical during her freshman year at the University of Cincinnati
- Aware of the financial toll of college tuition on her family, she left to sell sheet music and devote to studying piano at the Cincinnati College of Music.
- Began working in radio at WSAI 1925.
- Began full-time radio work at WKRC in 1928.

Story 3: (Accidental Career Start)

Her first broadcast was accidental. The station's only female host called in sick. Ruth was called on to perform and become comfortable behind the microphone in only few minutes. The program sponsor preferred how Ruth ran the program and she was hired to replace the host. Ruth believed the audience was intelligent and had more interests than what was traditionally covered in women's programs, so the focus was on topics other than cooking and household tips.

- Her prestige grew during the Great Flood of 1937.
- She calmed listeners and asked for donations of food, clothing, and money for the flood victims.
- She stayed at the station and slept on her desk when she was not on the air.
- The Red Cross received \$56,000 because of Lyons' radio appeals which was the largest amount raised for victims of a disaster as of 1937.
- She was appointed WKRC's program director because her work during the flood.

Story 4: (Empowerment)

Ruth would write a new song for each broadcast of "Your Sunday Matinee" on WKRC radio. Bandleader Paul Whiteman, a guest on the show in 1938, was impressed and offered to buy a few her original compositions under the agreement that the music would be published under his name. She politely declined.

- She did not read commercial copy and preferred to deliver commercials in her own words.
- She never followed a script for her programs however WSAI had a strict policy about writing and adhering to a script for their radio programs.
- She thought that she would be disciplined and lose her job when she was called into the manager's office. However, the station manager said he was pleased with her show and that the purpose of the meeting was an offer to work at WLW.

Story 5: (Impact)

After receiving Crosley's offer which was a \$10 raise, she met with WKRC owner Hulbert "Hub" Taft. He said that he could not match the offer, so Ruth left taking 14 sponsors with her. Taft later said that the ten-dollar raise cost WKRC millions in advertising.

- She joined Crosley Broadcasting in 1942.
- Her radio and television programs generated more than a million dollars annually.

Story 6: (Impact)

In 1943 her husband became sick with scarlet fever and both were confined to their home. She was so important to Crosley that he installed equipment at their home, so Lyons could broadcast from there until the quarantine was over.

- She hosted the Consumer's Foundation at WLW where participants tested products advertised on radio then reported their experiences.
- Later it became “Your Morning Matinee” which was a show that targeted female listeners with music and entertainment.
- “Your Morning Matinee” was also heard in New York city for 2 years because Crosley purchased New York radio station WINS in 1946.
- She hosted the program until 1951, when advised by her doctor to cut back her workload.
- In May 1949 Ruth debuted her idea of the 50 club where fifty women were invited to a daily, one-hour lunch which was broadcast live on television.
- She formulated her own set of rules for her television show and since her programs were impromptu, those working with her learned to expect almost anything and to make the necessary adjustments.
- She became the program director of WLW television in September 1949.
- Potential sponsors had a one-year waiting period before their commercials would be scheduled.

Story 7 (Influence)

The mention of a product name on the program meant stores would quickly experience a sellout of the item. She was also powerful enough to decide which products were advertised on her programs. She would only allow sponsors whose products she used and turned down products she did not like.

Story 8 (Influence)

She resolved differences between WLWT management and the local musicians' union before the disagreement turned into a walkout. She told station management that she considered herself one of the musicians and intended to walk the picket line with them. As a result, the musicians' demands were met to ensure Lyons would remain on the air.

- NBC was aware of her and in 1951 contracted with Crosley to carry a 30-minute version of the 50 Club for three years.

- Ruth did not enjoy the structured advertising, network time cues, loss of show control, and relocation to New York so contract was canceled after 1 year.
- In 1953 the audience was expanded to 100 people and renamed the 50/50 Club. The number 50 was originally selected because there were 50 seats in the audience. When the show expanded to a larger audience the seating capacity doubled to 100. So, they called the show 50 + 50 or 50/50 Club.
- The program became 90 minutes and was seen in Dayton, Columbus, and Indianapolis.
- The 50/50 Club visited each city at least once a year so that local viewers would see the show live.
- There was a 3-year waiting period for studio audience tickets
- The show was the top-rated daytime television program in the US from 1952 to 1964.
- In 1957 it was the first program in the Cincinnati market to be broadcast in color.
- The 50/50 Club was profiled in magazines such as McCall's, Ladies' Home Journal and Cosmopolitan.
- Nationally recognized guests such as Bob Hope, Arthur Godfrey, pianist Peter Nero, Jack E. Leonard, Nelson Eddy, Ted Lewis, Pearl Bailey, Myron Cohen came from the local supper club circuit (Beverly Hills & Lookout)
- She would not meet her guests before air time, so their conversations would be spontaneous.
- Musical guests had to perform live since she permitted no pre-recorded music and lip syncing.

Story 9: (Tragedy)

Her younger sister, Rose, died in 1964 after a ten-year battle with cancer. Late in that same year Ruth suffered a minor stroke and took a leave of absence from television. Her 20-year-old daughter (Candy) was diagnosed with cancer in January 1965 and died a year and a half later. Ruth went on another leave of absence from February until October 1966 due to her daughter's illness and subsequent death. Those close to Ruth felt that Candy's death took the life out of her. Ruth was unsure if she wanted to return to television. Once she did there were times when it was difficult to understand what she was saying and times when she was not able to perform at all.

- January 26, 1967 was her last television program.
- She published her memoirs, in 1969, entitled 'Remember With Me' which sold 90,000 copies
- She suffered a series of strokes in the 1970s and again in the 1980s.

Story 10: (Epithet - Impact)

Phil Donahue in a tribute to Ruth Lyons said, "If there had not been a Crosley Broadcasting with its commitment to local programming, and if there had not been a Ruth Lyons, I probably wouldn't be here". David Letterman credited Ruth and the 50/50 Club for teaching him about live talk shows on television.

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