





# Dear Mrs. Hazard

*For more than three decades beginning in the 1930s, Wisconsin women welcomed a teacher, counselor, and friend into their farm kitchens each morning — via a warm voice on the radio.*



BY ERIKA JANIK MA'04, MA'06

**L**ife on a Wisconsin farm in the early 1930s began before sunrise. By dawn, a rural woman had tended to animals and other outside farm chores before going inside to begin her household tasks. Few farms had running water, so she pumped water from the cistern to fill the reservoir of the great black range for the day's meals. She prepared rolls for their leisurely rise toward dinner and scooped up piles of work clothes for the wash bin. Dropping a handful of cinnamon sticks into a pot of simmering apples on their way toward becoming applesauce, she reached above the icebox and turned the knob on her radio just in time to hear a cheerful greeting: "Good morning, homemakers!"

Six mornings a week, starting promptly at ten o'clock, Aline Hazard greeted women across the state on WHA Radio's *Homemakers' Program*. Hazard, an authoritative home economist at the University of Wisconsin, and her colleagues instructed the unprepared Wisconsin homemaker on how to pickle, prepare frozen food, select a washing machine, and countless other household tasks. All the while, she sported perfectly coiffed hair, fashionable hats, and starched shirt-

waist dresses — yes, even on the radio.

Chosen to host the program in 1933, Hazard would become one of the *Homemakers' Program's* guiding forces and its most recognizable voice for thirty-two years. A cross between today's Martha Stewart and Oprah Winfrey, Hazard served as both a knowledgeable educator on modern homemaking and a trusted friend who helped to form a community among thousands of lonely, isolated Wisconsin farm women.

Until the mid-twentieth century, homemaking was a respected — and, frankly, expected — full-time occupation for women. The diligent homemaker studied cooking, cleaning, and child care to attain, according to Hazard's autobiography, *For Love of Mike*, a "more beautiful and worthwhile Wisconsin homelife."

Census records show that in the 1930s, most Wisconsin women lived on farms, and while certainly not working for pay, almost all women worked both inside and outside the home. While her husband and sons worked in the fields, she cooked, cleaned, and mended clothing. She also preserved meat, baked bread, churned butter, tended the garden, canned fruits and vegetables, raised

**All ears:** Aline Hazard, left, brought the UW directly into Wisconsin homes by serving as the beloved host of WHA Radio's *Homemakers' Program* for more than three decades. She often broadcast her stories from the field. During this interview circa 1957, a woman at a deer farm in Cornell, Wisconsin, described the earrings she made from acorns and pine cones and sold at the farm's gift shop.



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Learning for listeners: Aline Hazard, visiting a sorghum mill in Prairie du Chien, Wisconsin, in this undated photo, liked doing firsthand reporting for her radio show's devoted audience of Wisconsin farm women.

chickens, and, sometimes, even worked in the fields herself. All tasks were performed largely without electrical appliances, gas, or running water.

The full-time homemaker was an icon, an ideal that women could strive to reach, even if not perfectly attain. Although program guides in the Wisconsin Historical Society archives show that the *Homemakers' Program* covered such topics as the correct composition of a casserole and the many uses of cottage cheese in summer salads, Hazard's philosophy of homemaking went far deeper: she believed that proper technique and modern technology — such as washing machines and frozen food — would vastly improve the lives of rural women.

The *Homemakers' Program* had been created in 1929 by WHA Radio and the UW College of Agriculture to spread this very message. Until then, WHA Radio had periodically broadcast farm programs with domestic themes such as “Taking the Drudgery out of House Cleaning.” Reaching residents in all corners of Wisconsin was a central concern of the extension service in the 1920s, according to UW historian Rima Apple MA'74, PhD'81, and the UW College of Agriculture had come to depend upon radio broadcasts to spread useful information.

Relying on the talents of women in the departments of home economics and agricultural journalism, Andrew Hopkins, chair of agricultural journalism, created the *Homemakers' Program*, seeing early on the potential of radio to reach rural women who spent the majority of their daytime hours isolated from other adults. The women of the *Homemakers' Program* were trained in the latest technological approaches to home and family, helping to bridge the gap between the university and the farm.

The program was not the only show on the radio dial geared toward women. Yet the others focused on specific skills — parenting on the *Parents Magazine of the Air*; sewing on *Let's Make a Dress*, cooking on the *The Mystery Chef*, and household efficiency on *The Wife Saver*. Only WHA's *Homemakers' Program* — like the homemakers themselves — tried to do it all.

Under Hazard's direction, the program featured interviews and roundtables with UW specialists and community leaders who cheerfully provided advice, all punctuated with music.

Because food preparation was a daily activity for women, the program's content centered on recipes and cooking tips. Listeners tuned in to learn the secret to “glamorizing” carrots (try honey, a good

Wisconsin product!), or the way to turn “quick as a flash canned beets” into a “meal to remember.” Even the dowdy pot roast, a Midwestern farmhouse staple, could become the center of attention with the right salad, vegetables, and relish accompaniment.

Besides recipes, Hazard introduced listeners to new kitchen conveniences — and in 1940, one of those was frozen food. That dinner could be made using hard-frozen blocks, yet taste good, was a startling idea. Hazard's show taught listeners how to use such products by couching the “lesson” within dramatic episodes that imitated the newly invented radio soap opera. “Over at Our House” starred Janet, a young housewife, and her husband, Vic, who were saved time and again by the homemaking knowledge of Vic's sister, Helen. The episode “Fast Frozen Foods are New,” included in Hazard's personal papers at the Wisconsin Historical Society, found Helen enjoying dinner at Vic and Janet's house.

**VIC:** “By the way, Jan, these buttered peas are awfully good.”

**JANET:** “Thank you, I'm glad you like them. They're some of those fast frozen peas. It's the first time I've ever tried them.”

**VIC:** “Taste just about like fresh peas from the garden to me.”

**JANET:** (laughing) “Only I didn't have to spend hours shelling them like I do when we have peas that come from the garden.”

**HELEN:** “No, you certainly don't have all that bother with frozen foods. You put the vegetables right into the boiling water when they're still frozen, don't you?”

**JANET:** “Um hm. That's what the directions on the package said. I used just enough boiling water to barely cover the vegetables. What's the idea of putting ice cold food into boiling water?”

**VIC:** “Sure sounds kind of funny.”

**HELEN:** “Oh, there's a reason for that ... You see, as long as the food is frozen, it stays about the same as it was just before the freezing, but as soon as it starts to thaw ... that's a different story.”

Helen went on to explain the

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many benefits and uses of frozen foods to the budget-minded, busy homemaker. Recognizing that few Wisconsin farm-women would have freezers to prepare or keep frozen foods, Alice Hantke '31, MS'38, the show's writer and closing commentator, suggested that food could be stored in communal cold storage lockers until needed — perhaps not the handiest place for food meant to be a convenience for busy homemakers.

Other episodes included lessons on cleaning in "Making the House 'Spic and Span'" and "Scouring Makes Kitchen Utensils Shine"; on health in "Making Ordinary Colds Uncommon"; and on clothing in "Fashionable Shoes That Fit" and "Dress Styles Borrow from History."

Mail from Hazard's avid listeners poured into the studio. By 1962, she was receiving more than ten thousand letters each year. They came from all over Wisconsin, as well as from Michigan, Iowa, Illinois, and Minnesota. The show even received mail from states as far away as Georgia, and from international fans in Canada and Africa. Most listeners, many of whose letters were kept among Hazard's personal papers, requested recipes and cooking tips. Others praised Hazard and the show for its impact on their daily lives.

For listeners, Hazard became a trusted friend they could rely upon for advice. Once a farm girl herself, Hazard brought a sympathetic voice to the plight of farm women struggling to make ends meet. The intimacy of radio created a sense of physical unity among listeners and made Hazard seem as close as the house next door.

Listeners wrote to her for advice on anything and everything: "How long does a germ live?" ... "What color should I paint my house?" ... "May one brush teeth with salt instead of toothpaste, or does it scratch the enamel?"

Some questions must have made Hazard wonder what was going

on in Wisconsin homes: "Is it safe to eat rabbits that have spotted livers?" And "I have taken all the tubes out of the TV and cleaned them. There is no picture to follow, so now I don't know how to put them back. If I make the wrong combinations, will it be apt to hurt the sound?"


Hazard's speaking voice also captivated listeners as they went about their daily tasks. "Your quiet, well-modulated voice floating out over my refrigerator in the busy morning will inevitably catch my attention, and serious listening begins," wrote Rose Link '73 of Madison. Wrote another woman in Janesville, Wisconsin: "Thank you so much, Mrs. Hazard, you can say everything so nice and warm-heartedly, [it's] no wonder people respond to you right away. I think you must be one of the most beloved personalities on the radio."

The program remained one of the most popular shows on WHA Radio throughout the middle decades of the twentieth century. Hazard, who left the airwaves in June 1965, had added new features to the program over the years since joining it in 1933, but its underlying purpose remained steadfast — to bring women the latest domestic science from experts at the UW.

Today, the educational underpinnings of the *Homemakers' Program* live on in WHA's *Conversations with Larry Meiller*. "My mission is to make people's lives easier by sharing information that's useful and entertaining," says Meiller '67, MS'68, PhD'77, who views his show as a direct descendant of Hazard's. "We are a local medium that serves the needs and interests of Wisconsin people and no one else."

"I'm no different from my listeners," he adds. "We are all looking for solutions and help from knowledgeable people, and I think that creates a bond between listeners and the host."

The bond with Hazard was undeniably strong. In a culture that rarely acknowledged women's work as essential or the home as an important societal space, she offered homemakers a sense of worth.

"A woman confronting the world has no greater resource than those she finds within herself," Hazard once wrote. "What modern woman has to recapture is the wisdom that just being a woman is her central task and her greatest honor. It is a task that challenges her whole character, intelligence, and imagination." 

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