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Article Summary: The development of WJAG radio from a pioneer stage to a full service facility with a liberal schedule of local information and entertainment also catapulted Karl Stefan to popularity and, eventually, to Congress with a landslide victory in 1934. Stefan nurtured an emotional affinity with radio listeners on his "Voice of the Street" and noon news broadcasts. Stefan's victory is an early example of the power of electronic media exposure and its potential impact on the political process.

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Photographs / Images : Karl Stefan; Norfolk Daily News, campaign ad; Edgar Howard, 1917-1919; Karl Stefan on campaign

# Karl Stefan WJAG and the CONGRESSIONAL CAMPAIGN

of  
1934

By Mark Smith

In the late 1920s *Radio Digest* observed that WJAG, established by the *Norfolk* (Nebraska) *Daily News* in 1922, had obtained a favorable frequency from the Federal Radio Commission, 1060 kilocycles, because of its "community usefulness." The publication credited WJAG's first announcer, Karl Stefan, with nursing "the station through from infancy to its present dominating influence."<sup>1</sup> In the early 1930s Stefan reigned as the most visible and popular symbol of WJAG and his continuous participation in highly popular radio programs boosted his 1934 election to the U.S. House of Representatives. The story of WJAG and Stefan's daily tie to radio listeners during the turbulent years of the Great Depression provides an early example of the emerging relationship between the electoral process and the electronic media.

In 1922 Stefan had two important but distinct jobs at the *Norfolk Daily News*: city editor and pioneer radio announcer. In the mid-1920s Stefan had shed his print ties at the *News*, but for the next decade his distinct voice was heard daily on the WJAG noon news and on a host of other broadcasts. Besides his radio duties, Stefan owned and operated a local magazine and tobacco shop, "The Karl Stefan Cigar Store," a popular storefront in downtown Norfolk.<sup>2</sup>

Shortly after the Granada Theater amazed a Norfolk audience with its first "talkie," a motion picture with sound,

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*Mark Smith is an instructor of broadcast journalism at Stephens College, Columbia, Missouri, and a graduate of the University of Nebraska-Lincoln.*

on December 31, 1928, WJAG expanded its Monday through Saturday program schedule. Eight hours of daily transmissions, the 7 A.M. to 8 A.M. news and music hour, and continuous broadcasting from 10 A.M. to 5 P.M., filtered through the radios of WJAG listeners in early 1929. On Sunday afternoons, the station activated its broadcast apparatus for a sixty-minute music broadcast—Brown's Ladies Store "Brownies."<sup>3</sup>

Phonograph music filled a portion of WJAG's broadcast day in late January 1929, but a weighty emphasis was given to local entertainment, which meant additional staff was needed. WJAG acquired the services of Serl Hutton's musicians, who performed up to three hours a day at random times, as its studio orchestra. Eva Austin, a local pianist, was chosen "studio hostess." WJAG listeners tuned in to the Cornhusker Girls, a female trio with organ music from the Granada, and "Dad" Parker's "old time music." Stefan's noon news report, the foundation of WJAG programming, featured news, bulletins, farm markets, weather, road conditions, a hospital report, and cradle roll. The show ended with a "Norco-gram," daily advice on poultry raising, sponsored by

the Norfolk Cereal and Flour Mills. The feed company also presented a half-hour music show, "Margaret Mahaffey—The Norco Girl," twice a week.<sup>4</sup>

Stefan's announcing delivery was an intimate one-on-one encounter for many WJAG listeners. A fellow announcer claimed Stefan's success rested on his broadcast personality, which "enabled him to become intimately acquainted with the listeners." Among the most popular programs Stefan produced in the 1920s was the creation of the mythical "radio family." By the late 1920s thousands of radio family listeners had requested "seats" at Stefan's noontime table.<sup>5</sup>

The extension of broadcast hours opened a new source of advertising revenue for WJAG. "It is during the afternoon," the *News* suggested, "that merchants and others desiring radio publicity will be granted time." In March 1929 the Record Livestock Company of Omaha, the Norfolk Creamery, and Maytag sponsored a variety of evening entertainment broadcasts. Printer's Devil cigar and candy programs, named for Karl Stefan's brandname products sold at his Norfolk cigar store, appeared on WJAG's schedule in the latter half of that year.<sup>6</sup>

In April 1929 the *News* announced that WJAG had rebuilt its broadcast plant "from the microphone to the antenna." The \$10,000 project included the installation of a frequency stabilization crystal, expensive transmission tubes, and the conversion to one thousand watts of power. With a stronger signal transmitted to the territory, Stefan's noon show broadcast the "receptogram."

## Karl Stefan, WJAG, and the 1934 Congressional Campaign

The program provided local and DX (long distance) listeners with atmospheric conditions, compiled by WJAG, to gauge individual receiver sensitivity.<sup>7</sup>

By late 1929 the first uninterrupted continuous daytime schedule of news and entertainment (7 A.M. to 7 P.M., Monday through Saturday, in September) had arrived at WJAG. Serl Hutton's orchestra, vocalist Margaret Mahaffey, and accordionist Albin Seleskar, a former WJAG employee from Yankton, South Dakota, were a part of WJAG's regular entertainment roster. Sunday programming was chiseled into two separate broadcast periods totaling fewer than five hours a day in late October.<sup>8</sup>

A major overhaul of WJAG's broadcasting plant, which extended Stefan's reach to listeners in eastern Nebraska, was announced in February 1931. The Norfolk station constructed a new transmission facility a few miles west of the mezzanine studio near Eighteenth Street and Norfolk Avenue. Practical restrictions and government intervention prompted the update. Station engineers pointed to external sources, electrical motors and similar alternating current devices near the downtown transmitter site, which interfered with WJAG's broadcast apparatus.<sup>9</sup>

In late 1930 the Federal Radio Commission (FRC) had issued strict modulation guidelines forcing stations nationwide to revamp their transmission plants. General Order 97 (renamed General Order 111 in 1931) imposed a signal standard of more than 75 percent modulation. The FRC labeled the new rule "a complete revolution in the type of equipment used in broadcasting stations," which not only improved audio quality but also sharply defined and expanded radio station coverage patterns. WJAG's transmitter was configured to deliver 100 percent modulation. The station estimated its broadcast range would increase one-third once the apparatus was activated on the western edge of Norfolk. On April 30, 1931, Stefan, whose broadcast programs would now reach new listeners, presided over dedi-

cation ceremonies of the new facility.<sup>10</sup>

Radio wielded considerable influence during the depths of the Great Depression and WJAG was no exception. A general appeal from WJAG to fulfill Madison County's quota of \$600 for national Red Cross relief was broadcast in January. Nearly eleven months later, a depressed economy and parched fields affected the fortunes of Nebraska hog



Karl Stefan. RG2624-7

producers, who requested federal and state assistance. A petition signed by local farmers, and read on WJAG, stated that producers "cannot exist as hog raisers with the price of corn at 50 cents a bushel and hogs at 3 cents a pound. . . . Our farms are stocked with hogs and we have little corn to feed them."<sup>11</sup>

By late 1931 economic hard times had spread to other sectors of the agricultural economy. Dry weather and a severe grasshopper infestation in 1931 devastated crops in several north-central and northeast Nebraska counties. In October the twin disasters provoked immediate requests of livestock feed and human provisions for farmers in Keya Paha, Rock, Brown, Boyd, Holt, Ante-

lope (which borders Madison County west of Norfolk), Knox, and Cedar counties. A state survey revealed that six hundred northern Nebraska farm families required outside assistance. Although the state collected \$1,100 in private donations for needy farmers, in late 1931 Nebraska Governor Charles Bryan rejected urgent appeals for a special legislative session to consider a two-million-dollar aid package destined for emergency livestock feed. Bryan's position was unchanged despite pleas from Dr. W. J. Douglas, Holt County relief chairman. The Atkinson, Nebraska, mayor said National Red Cross efforts, which Bryan viewed as a duplication of state relief, secured clothing and food but that private donations were insufficient to address the severity of insuring adequate animal forage.<sup>12</sup>

In late January 1932 the Norfolk Chamber of Commerce formed a relief fund executive committee. Among its members were Gene Huse, who published the *News* and founded WJAG, and Karl Stefan, his chief announcer. The group set a goal of raising \$500,000 to distribute livestock feed through the Red Cross to local farmers, whose forage stocks had been depleted. To qualify, each rural family had to possess a minimum of ten hogs, six cattle, and six horses. The committee named its statewide effort the North Nebraska Drouth Relief Committee. Huse traveled to Nebraska's largest city to coordinate efforts with the Omaha Chamber of Commerce to raise \$50,000 in local public and private funds. A goal of \$10,000 had been set as Norfolk's share. A former Omaha Chamber executive, Arthur (Art) Thomas, headed the drought association, which established an office at the Hotel Norfolk.<sup>13</sup>

To save livestock from the ravages of drought and harsh winter weather that descended upon the area, a massive effort was required quickly. A report to the drought committee from Naper, Nebraska, lamented: "The conditions out here are the worst I have seen any place. Many of the fields are as bare as a

road and much stock is starving." In early February, 137 railcar loads of hay were delivered to struggling farmers in northern Nebraska. A WJAG broadcast benefit solicited funds in late January. A week later, the station's fundraising efforts collected \$400 in donations.<sup>14</sup>

A drought committee statement on Stefan's noon news show clarified comments from the Red Cross that "the worst of the emergency" ended in mid-February:

If your emergency has not been met we are still with you and will stay with you until the job is done. . . . The committee is not entirely satisfied that the emergency has been met and will make further investigation. . . . Don't forget that other [rail] cars of feed have been promised for the next ten days and that money has been raised and is being raised to buy more.<sup>15</sup>

Drought and economic disparity affected not only livestock but also farm families. In February the drought committee distributed one-hundred-pound sacks of beans to residents in Center, and a month later the state shipped carloads of potatoes to northern Nebraska. By early April the drought committee disbanded. Of nearly \$12,000 collected in the Norfolk area Stefan's radio family contributed \$1,300. By this time the North Nebraska Drouth Committee's director, Art Thomas, assumed a new post: WJAG station manager.<sup>16</sup>

In 1920 Huse and Thomas met for the first time in Norfolk, where Thomas delivered a speech at an organizational meeting planning the completion of the Hotel Norfolk. A friendship ensued, with Thomas spending time with Huse on Lake Okoboji, Iowa, in the 1920s. Thomas was part owner and general manager of the Stroud Manufacturing Company of Omaha, a producer of road-building equipment until his appointment as director of the North Nebraska Drouth Committee.<sup>17</sup>

When Thomas arrived at the radio station in 1932, he established an instant rapport with Stefan, the star attraction of WJAG programming. Thomas said the two men "had a 'gentleman's agreement' . . . that we were friends and al-

ways would be until one notified the other, that we would never have to wonder how one felt about the other, that we would each go about our respective tasks and not feel obliged to waste any time in back slapping."<sup>18</sup>

The Depression spawned a radio burlesque convention to bolster public confidence as part of WJAG's tenth anniversary in July 1932. A broadcast ceremony, with sixty-one entertainers and several orchestras, borrowed as its theme the Depression tune "Happy Days Are Here Again." Stefan, who portrayed Norfolk's version of humorist Will Rogers, escorted a woman representing "Miss Prosperity" from the Hotel Norfolk ballroom amid the cheers of four hundred conventioners. The symbol of hope defeated her counterpart, "Old Man Depression," in a mock nomination for the "presidency."<sup>19</sup> Stefan, known as the Printer's Devil on his daily broadcasts, paid homage to the radio family during an anniversary show broadcast:

We have seen the adopting and the passing on of the original official radio fathers and mothers of this family. We have seen the family grow to nearly 100,000 strong. We have seen and recorded the passing on of great Nebraska and South Dakota pioneer men and women and we have recorded the birth of a new generation in our baby family. Our first babies of ten years ago are wearing long pants today.<sup>20</sup>

A WJAG rate card lists advertising charges for the tenth anniversary day-long broadcast. From 8 A.M. to 11 A.M. and from 2 P.M. to 6 P.M., sponsors paid \$25 an hour. The noon rate, Stefan's popular news show, fetched \$100 for the entire sixty minutes.<sup>21</sup>

A broadcast atmosphere designed to lift low Depression-era spirits was not limited to WJAG's anniversary broadcast. At the close of Stefan's noon report, which the *News* claimed drew fifty thousand listeners in late 1932, Don Bridge of the Norfolk Flour and Cereal Mills delivered Scottish jokes. Less than a year later, the radio family "Scotchman" received nearly 150 pieces of mail a week filled with ethnic humor, which parodied the supposed frugality of Scottish people.

"Without a doubt," the *News* observed, "he has one of the largest followings of those who appear regularly before WJAG's microphone." Bridge's popular noontime humor, known as "Laf-a-Day" in 1933, ended in 1946.<sup>22</sup>

In late 1932 Stefan created, produced, and announced WJAG's "Voice of the Street." "We explained to him the technical difficulties and expense involved," Thomas recalled. "He offered to conduct the program without any extra compensation from us, if we would furnish the time and equipment, to which we readily agreed."<sup>23</sup> The Monday through Saturday broadcasts featured live interviews with pedestrians in front of Stefan's cigar store. A daily question was posed to passersby for their off-the-cuff remarks. The half-hour show premiered on December 19 at 10:30 A.M., but was shortened to a quarter-hour less than a week later and moved to a permanent time of 10:15 A.M. in January 1933. Stefan recalled "the difficulty to get [shy] people to talk into the microphone."<sup>24</sup>

Stefan's daily questions ranged from the simple concerns of life ("What is the best Christmas gift this year?") to serious issues that affected northeast Nebraskans in the 1930s ("How has the Depression affected our mode of living?"). In January 1933 the *News* unveiled a column of pedestrians' responses to Stefan's questions: "Voice of the Street—Offhand Interviews over Station WJAG" was a daily *News* feature for nearly five years. In an unusual "Street" broadcast in May 1933, Stefan talked with young men at the Norfolk City Auditorium undergoing physical exams for the federal government's forestry service program. "Then he carried the microphone up the stairs into the council chamber where the examination was going and interviewed the naked boys while they were waiting in line for examination," the *News* said. Later that year, a Nebraska couple was married after meeting each other through a "Street" broadcast. Two Norfolk sisters told Stefan that Cupid ignored them on

## Karl Stefan, WJAG, and the 1934 Congressional Campaign

Capable

Trustworthy



Practical

Vigorous

# Karl Stefan

## CONGRESS

**Capable**

His experience as a newspaper writer, traveler and business man has given him unusual qualifications to represent the people of this district. He is a student of economics and government; a man who is familiar with conditions both at home and in other countries.

**Practical**

Trained in the School of Hard Knocks, he understands the problems which confront the common people of this agricultural section. He is not visionary, but believes equal-faculties can best be overcome by the application of plain, everyday common sense.

**Trustworthy**

Karl Stefan has always been loyal and devoted to the people of this district. He has served them faithfully—sincerely—and will never violate the confidence which has been placed in him. His character is above reproach.

**Vigorous**

Karl Stefan is fifty years of age—in the prime of life—physically and mentally qualified to give this district vigorous and energetic representation at Washington, and to give personal attention to the needs of his constituents.

### "YOU CAN DEPEND ON KARL"

Norfolk Daily News, Nov. 1, 1934.

Valentine's Day. The radio host informed WJAG listeners it was "too bad that such good looking girls had to be neglected." A Scotia, Nebraska, listener heard the broadcast and sent the twins a Valentine. Eventually, Gladys Kimball and the central Nebraska man, identified only as "Mr. Urich," exchanged marriage vows.<sup>25</sup>

As the "Voice of the Street" began to chart its own history, a longtime feature ended in 1932: radio code classes. Stefan designed the on-air school in

1923 to train individuals in Continental code, the international language of amateur radio operators and other wireless telegraphers. During the next decade, the annual classes drew thousands of students. Those who successfully completed the broadcast instruction, through tests mailed to WJAG, received a code school diploma. In 1928 two northeast Nebraska teenage girls, Clare Carpenter of Plainview and Louise Willers of Pilger, received top class honors for decoding the highest number of

words per minute. By 1936 Stefan remarked that scores of graduates worked aboard naval and merchant ships, operated amateur stations, or worked for commercial broadcasters.<sup>26</sup>

The National Industrial Recovery Act (NRA), which expanded the government's role in stimulating the national economy, became federal law in June 1933. The colossal measure, promoted by President Franklin D. Roosevelt, called for executive approval of "voluntary" business codes that set prices, wages, and employee hours for seven thousand U.S. industries. Money for public works projects was added to stimulate employment. A complex system of 557 codes had been approved for businesses, large and small, nationwide. The NRA "drafted" Stefan to oversee local recovery efforts in Keya Paha, Boyd, Knox, Brown, Rock, Holt, Antelope, Pierce, and Madison counties. The government reminded the local radio announcer that his "duties will be to get every patriotic American citizen to cooperate in this program."<sup>27</sup>

A new piece of radio gear was introduced to WJAG listeners in 1933: a wireless remote unit. The set enabled station engineers to transmit point-to-point audio from distant locations for rebroadcast on WJAG. In October Stefan used the device for a sponsored cornhusking broadcast on the W. F. F. Winter farm three miles north of Norfolk.<sup>28</sup>

WJAG programming in the early 1930s, as it had in the 1920s, catered to a wide range of listeners. The station experimented with quarter-hour German broadcasts in 1932. Stefan and local vocalist Esther Martin Raasch hosted fifteen-minute German programs that overwhelmed the local telephone system with listener responses in January 1933. The same musicians performed a live radio show on the Hotel Norfolk mezzanine to a large audience in April.<sup>29</sup>

A Norfolk bank robbery in October 1933 showcased the quick dissemination of breaking news on WJAG. Four men armed with pistols robbed the Security State Bank and fled with \$10,000.

The bandits briefly kidnapped five persons inside the bank and forced them to ride in a getaway car before releasing the four men and a woman several blocks south of downtown Norfolk. Less than an hour later, Stefan and Thomas conducted live street interviews with eyewitnesses. A local pilot heard the broadcast and made a futile aerial search for the robbers' vehicle. The Federal Radio Commission granted WJAG permission to extend its on-air schedule past sunset for broadcasts from the Norfolk Police Department. Two state deputies, en route to Norfolk, used information from WJAG's reports to alert sheriffs in nearby counties of breaking developments.<sup>30</sup>

The 1930s generated not only an economic tailspin in northeast Nebraska but also some of the most inhospitable weather on record. Shortly after Stefan and his wife departed Norfolk in January 1934 for a six-week vacation in Central and South America, the first of several throat-gagging dust storms descended upon the Norfolk area. A strong northwest wind blew a thick layer of dust that nearly blocked the sun's view. Blinding dust storms plagued the region throughout the summer. In June the *News* reported that dust whipped by gusty winds sifted through window cracks depositing a fine layer of silt in Norfolk homes. Two months later a dust storm struck Norfolk, destroying power poles, shattering window glass, and tearing limbs from trees.<sup>31</sup>

Soon after Stefan returned to WJAG in late March—Thomas had announced the noon news the previous two months—hot, dry weather accompanied periodic dust storms in the Norfolk area. In May temperatures soared above one hundred degrees for nine days, further aggravating the region's powder-like soil. Local rain gauges recorded less than an inch of rainfall the entire month, the driest May in forty-two years. By mid-year precipitation was nearly six and one-half inches below normal. Madison County agricultural agent J. H. Williams, who appeared on Stefan's noon show, told the radio family, "The

drouth is becoming more serious every day."<sup>32</sup> In early June Williams painted a gloomy picture of local agriculture on WJAG's "Farm Forum." More than three-quarters of Madison County's 482 farmers, 76 percent, were unable to properly care for their livestock:

This is appalling and means that they must reduce their livestock holdings immediately. Many have no corn or hay on hand. Corn has passed 50 cents locally and hay is changing hands at prices up to \$20 a ton. Pastures are dead. Oats are hopeless and there will not be enough to seed next year's crop if every grain is saved, it seems.<sup>33</sup>

The hot weather in May continued into summer. By late June Norfolk had recorded its fourteenth day of temperatures that soared to one hundred degrees or more. With no relief in sight, a new record high of 113 degrees was set on July 10 in Norfolk, which damaged early planted corn in northeast Nebraska. In the next two weeks Mother Nature produced eight consecutive days of one-hundred-degree heat. Norfolk received more than a half-inch of rain in late July, but it was too late to save most early season corn. In the Elgin, Nebraska, region southwest of Norfolk, the heat withered three-quarters or more of the early crop, and burned fields of alfalfa and hay. "Farmers do not know what they will do for feed to carry their stock over the winter," the *News* observed.<sup>34</sup>

In August 1934 WJAG acted as a clearinghouse for farmers with livestock feed and producers that had stock but no forage. The station maintained a roster of farmers willing to feed extra milk cows through the winter. Another list matched farmers who needed to move their stock to locations with sufficient fodder. Farmers handling additional cows received all of the milk and one-half the higher weight value. Scores of producers participated in the radio livestock exchange.<sup>35</sup>

Against the backdrop of a stagnant farm economy and inhospitable weather, radio listeners and friends in 1933 began urging Stefan to run for the U.S. House of Representatives. "He did

not seek the office of Congressman," Thomas recalled. "It sought him. We well remember the first letter received at the radio station suggesting he run for Congress." Stefan had brushed aside previous requests that he seek elective office. By June 1934 the Norfolk announcer learned that petitions were circulating in northeast Nebraska encouraging him to run for the Third District seat, a constituency of nearly two dozen eastern Nebraska counties. "I am still so surprised that I really don't know whether to run or not," Stefan said. "I have never been a candidate for public office."<sup>36</sup>

By July the Nebraska secretary of state received scores of petitions with more than three thousand signatures of Third District residents, who requested that Stefan's name appear on the Republican primary ballot. The Norfolk announcer acknowledged the public mandate and officially filed as a House candidate on July 3, 1934. A week earlier Stefan had confided to friends that he dismissed any notion of entering the congressional race. Stefan told the *News* he was "amazed" at the number of petitions bearing his name. "I was more amazed at the many letters I have received from people all over the district urging me to run. In these letters people have told me that they believed I could render this part of the country a real service if I am fortunate enough to be sent to Washington."<sup>37</sup>

Twelve years of radio exposure had transformed Stefan into a household name in northeast Nebraska, but his career had not relied solely on repetitive broadcasts to establish a link with the common man and woman. Robert E. (Bob) Thomas, Art Thomas's son, was personally acquainted with WJAG's most popular announcer. Bob recalled that Stefan forged a special bond with the radio family. "[Listeners] felt Karl was talking to them," Thomas said.<sup>38</sup> In 1934 a representative of the Republican State Committee, Mrs. W. E. Minier, said Stefan's broadcast duties had put him in touch with the issues affecting Third District residents. His regular appearances

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on WJAG continued throughout the primary and general election campaigns—Stefan conducted the noon news and “Voice of the Street.”<sup>39</sup>

As the August primary drew near, area communities formed “Karl Stefan for Congress” clubs. Local organizations attracted 107 Clarkson supporters and 276 Meadow Grove residents, who endorsed the Stefan candidacy. At least a dozen other towns followed suit. Stefan won the Republican House nomination in the summer primary with a large plurality over H. Halderson of Newman Grove and Harvey Glatfelter of Central City. With the fall campaign about to begin, Stefan promised to visit Third District communities to gather information for a political platform. “In my years of daily [radio] meetings with you I have gained much inspiration as to your wishes and when my plans are completed I shall first make my report to you.”<sup>40</sup>

Many years of radio exposure attracted large crowds to the Stefan campaign. The *Emerson (Nebr.) Tri-County Press* reported that “hundreds of persons in this territory who listen to Mr. Stefan’s noon-day program every day were given a chance to see what their favorite announcer looked like.” In Bloomfield the local newspaper observed the Republican candidate “gave a splendid talk, not from a political standpoint, but just as a friend, who also wanted to get acquainted with his radio friends.” The *Wayne (Nebr.) Herald*, which described Stefan as a “popular radio announcer,” reported he was warmly received during a speech at the Wayne County Fair.<sup>41</sup>

As the general election drew near, a Fullerton, Nebraska, man delivered a broadcast political attack questioning Stefan’s support of the New Deal, President Roosevelt’s program designed to lift the U.S. from its economic doldrums. Joseph Shields also told WJAG listeners that Stefan was unqualified to hold office. By early October, the Republican hopeful had not yet revealed his cures for the Depression blues afflicting Third District residents. At a rally organized

by a “Stefan for Congress Club” in Humphrey, the *Democrat* noted, “He neither attacked the present administration for what it was endeavoring to do nor did he tell his hearers exactly where he stood on the questions that they are



Edgar Howard, probably when he was Nebraska lieutenant governor, 1917–19. RG3297-3

most interested in.”<sup>42</sup> The Norfolk radio announcer told Humphrey residents that “the Old Deal is gone . . . there are good things in [President Roosevelt’s] New Deal.”<sup>43</sup>

Stefan stuck to his strategy of gathering information before announcing his position on national issues, which he delivered in an October 19 broadcast address to the WJAG radio family. In a year heavily favoring Democrats, Stefan delivered a carefully crafted, nonpartisan platform of nine broadly worded

pledges that avoided attacking his opponent. Art Thomas recalled that Stefan “does not discuss partisan politics and pays no attention to the slurring remarks of opposition, and [he] does not discuss his opponents.” Stefan pledged his support for legislation that benefitted agriculture and labor. His goal was legislation “whether it is proposed by Republicans or Democrats, which in your opinion and mine is for the best interests of the people of this district.”<sup>44</sup>

Stefan’s opponent in the general election was Democratic incumbent Edgar Howard, a Nebraska political icon and newspaperman, whose trademark was hair worn in a down-to-the-collar bob, complemented by a black frock coat and string tie. Howard purchased the *Columbus (Nebr.) Weekly Telegram* in 1900, and transformed the newspaper into a daily publication in the early 1920s. He served as Nebraska lieutenant governor from 1917 to 1919 and was elected to six consecutive terms in Congress beginning in 1922. Howard ardently supported Roosevelt’s economic policies. During a 1932 presidential campaign address on WJAG, he attacked Republican monetary policies in the 1920s that “began the toboggan slide from the hill of prosperity to the valley of adversity.” In the Third District campaign of 1934 Howard was expected to easily win another term.<sup>45</sup>

For the balance of the campaign, Stefan avoided partisan attacks in favor of political pragmatism. A large print ad, in which he avoided the word “Republican,” revealed his “practical” approach to solving problems. He told an audience of 1,500 persons in Columbus, his opponent’s home turf, that the campaign “is not an issue between Karl Stefan and President Roosevelt, but a question of who people of the Third District want as their agent or representative in Washington.” At a rally in Neligh, Nebraska, Stefan promised to support the president’s Depression antidotes if those policies benefitted Third District patrons.<sup>46</sup>

In late October Stefan informed local



A snapshot of Karl Stefan on the campaign trail, probably in the 1940s. RG2624-43

supporters the opposition had voiced “some insinuating and misleading statements,” but he refused to become embroiled in political mudslinging. Stefan applied his radio roots to justify a “clean” campaign: “I know these people in North Nebraska; we have talked things over together many times during the past twelve years; they do not like personalities or mud-throwing any better than I do, and we will simply have none of it.”<sup>47</sup>

The night before voters entered the polls a large street rally attracted an estimated seven to ten thousand Stefan supporters in downtown Norfolk. After a four-block torchlight parade Stefan told the throng that if elected, he would deliver “common sense and vigorous representation.” In an election where Madison County voters overwhelmingly cast their ballots for Democratic candidates, Stefan crushed Howard by nearly twenty thousand votes in the Third District race. As the lone Republican elected to national office in Nebraska—Democrats won four of the five congressional seats and a six-year senate post—the Norfolk announcer carried every county in the Third District, which in-

cluded Platte, Howard’s home county. It was an astounding political upset.<sup>48</sup>

In a *Telegram* editorial, Howard said his defeat “cannot be regarded as repudiation of our President and the New Deal by the people of our district. It was a personal defeat, and I accept it as such.” A month later the Columbus congressman blamed his loss on “the combined efforts of the radio trust and power trust.” Howard, who lacked Stefan’s radio exposure, said he supported legislation that would collect federal fees, based on a percentage of advertising, for the right of broadcasters to use “God’s own radio waves.”<sup>49</sup> Several months after the election, the former congressman used Stefan’s Washington office “whenever he wants it,” Stefan confided to Gene Huse, “and [I] have been as kind to him as I would be to anyone else from the District.”<sup>50</sup>

Nationwide attention focused on Stefan’s congressional victory. Fellow Republicans and newspaper reporters wanted to know how the GOP candidate scored such a stunning victory when Democrats swept the majority of offices. The *News* suggested that Stefan’s success hinged on his lack of

political machinery, a clean campaign, contacts with listeners on two daily radio shows, and a rigorous campaign schedule of four to ten speeches a day. Although WJAG dropped the congressman-elect from its payroll after the election, the radio family demanded to hear from its favorite announcer, who was unable to broadcast because of a sore throat. Stefan, who departed for Washington, D.C. in late December to represent the Third District, promised listeners he would stay in touch with broadcast letters. In early 1935 Art Thomas began delivering Stefan’s capitol observations in a regularly broadcast newsletter.<sup>51</sup>

In December 1934, nearly a month after the general election, Stefan squelched a rumor he was ineligible to hold office. Reports had circulated that the foreign-born Stefan was not a naturalized citizen. Stefan produced government documents revealing his father had been granted American citizenship in 1897. Under nineteenth-century immigration law, the children of naturalized citizens automatically attained the same status.<sup>52</sup>

Mickey Sullivan, the Farmer Poet who delivered regular broadcasts of homespun verses in the 1920s and 1930s, paid tribute to Stefan upon his departure from WJAG:

Friends, at the head of that mythical table of this Radio Family so fair, it seems we are losing a leader. He is leaving a vacant chair. Through many long years, we have listened. We’ve enjoyed it so many a time. He’s bound this family together and tied them there tighter than twine. . . . And now at noon, when you tune on this station, and the voice that you hear is not Karl, please, just make the best of the bargain and don’t push the plug with a snarl.<sup>53</sup>

After his 1934 House victory Stefan was reelected to consecutive terms through 1950 with pluralities of more than 64 percent. Stefan defeated Howard again in 1938 and scored his largest victory, 80 percent of the Third District vote, against Victor McGonigle in 1940.<sup>54</sup>

## Karl Stefan, WJAG, and the 1934 Congressional Campaign

By 1935 WJAG had progressed from the pioneer stage of radio to a full-service facility that dispensed a liberal schedule of local information and entertainment. Karl Stefan was a key player in that development; however, it is clear he benefitted from the station as well. Stefan nurtured an emotional affinity with radio listeners on his "Voice of the Street" and noon news broadcasts that translated to an overwhelming victory in the 1934 congressional election. Stefan's victory is an early example of the power of electronic media exposure and its potential impact on the political process.

### Notes

<sup>1</sup> "Radio Digest Tells of WJAG's Service," *Norfolk Daily News* (hereafter cited as *NDN*), Jan. 9, 1929.

<sup>2</sup> *Congressional Record* 84, pt. 2 (Jan. 9, 1939): 50–51; "Stefan's Store Asset to Public," *NDN*, Feb. 27, 1933.

<sup>3</sup> "2,100 Persons Hear 'Talkies' in Debut," *NDN*, Jan. 1, 1929; "Radio Flashes," Monday through Friday schedule example, *NDN*, Jan. 26, 1929; "Radio Flashes," Saturday schedule example, *NDN*, Feb. 1, 1929; "New Radio Features Popular with Fans," *NDN*, Dec. 8, 1928.

<sup>4</sup> "Radio Flashes," Jan. 26, 1929; "WJAG to Offer New Features Next Week," *NDN*, Nov. 30, 1928; Norco-grams promotional ad, *NDN*, Mar. 10, 1928; Norco Girl promotional ad, *NDN*, Jan. 5, 1929.

<sup>5</sup> "Hello Friends, Hello Everybody!—Karl Stefan's Noonday Greeting on WJAG," *NDN*, July 25, 1932; see also "Station Second to Get Permit in Nebraska," *ibid.* *Congressional Record* 84, pt. 2 (Jan. 9, 1939): 51; "Radio Fans to Name Bills of Station WJAG," *Omaha Bee-News*, Nov. 5, 1928.

<sup>6</sup> "WJAG to Offer New Features Next Week;" "3 WJAG Programs Are This Evening," *NDN*, Mar. 26, 1929; "3 Groups Entertain Over Station WJAG," *NDN*, Mar. 27, 1929; "Radio Flashes," *NDN*, June 15, 1929; July 3, 1929; Sept. 14, 1929.

<sup>7</sup> "Station WJAG is Now using 1,000 Watts," *NDN*, Apr. 6, 1929; "WJAG Greets Fans with New Feature," *NDN*, Apr. 8, 1929.

<sup>8</sup> "WJAG Will Resume Longer Broadcast Hours," *NDN*, Sept. 10, 1929; WJAG broadcast hours, *NDN*, Oct. 31, 1929.

<sup>9</sup> The 1931 transmission site, moved farther west of Norfolk in the 1940s, is a residential site in 1997 near Westridge Drive and Koenigstein Avenue. "Power Plant of WJAG to be Set Up Outside City," *NDN*, Feb. 14, 1931.

<sup>10</sup> Federal Radio Commission, *Fifth Annual Report of the Federal Radio Commission* (Washing-

ton: GPO, 1931) in *Federal Radio Commission Annual Reports*, 6, 97–98. The characteristics of amplitude modulation (AM), the type of signal used by WJAG, relates modulation to signal strength. Higher modulation translates to a stronger signal with enhanced audio quality. In 1932 the FRC reminded stations that "the percentage of modulation is more important than power, and the effectiveness of the site and efficiency of the radiating system are more important than either." "WJAG Improved Service with New Station," *NDN*, Feb. 29, 1932; Federal Radio Commission, *Sixth Annual Report of the Federal Radio Commission* (Washington: GPO, 1932), in *Federal Radio Commission Annual Reports*, 31; "Dedicate New Plant of WJAG Thursday Noon," *NDN*, Apr. 29, 1931; "WJAG Transmitting Plant is Dedicated," *NDN*, Apr. 30, 1931.

<sup>11</sup> "Radio Station Aids Red Cross in Fund Drive," *NDN*, Jan. 24, 1931; "Farmers Asking Better Prices for Their Hogs," *NDN*, Dec. 12, 1931.

<sup>12</sup> "Hopper Scourge in 1931 One of Nation's Worst," *NDN*, Apr. 2, 1932; "Drouth Relief Survey to be Finished Soon," *NDN*, Oct. 19, 1931; "Bryan Opposes Any Different Relief Method," *NDN*, Jan. 29, 1932; "Drouth Relief Fund Mounts; Laborers Paid," *NDN*, Dec. 5, 1931; "Boyd Farmers Disgusted at Bryan's Acts," *NDN*, Jan. 21, 1932.

<sup>13</sup> Although the Jan. 30, 1932, *News* edition identified the relief organization as the "North Nebraska Drouth Association," an official group document calls it the "North Nebraska Drouth Relief Committee." "Asks Nebraskans Donate \$500,000 in Drouth Relief," *Omaha World-Herald*, Jan. 26, 1932; "Relief Fund Executive Committee," "Officials Move to Make Loans for Stock Feed," *NDN*, Jan. 30, 1932; "Red Cross to Assure Drouth Aid Equity," *Omaha World-Herald*, Jan. 29, 1932; "Norfolk Drive for \$10,000 is Started Monday," *NDN*, Feb. 1, 1932; "Drouth Relief Campaign Now Being Expanded," *NDN*, Feb. 6, 1932; Arthur C. (Art) Thomas, Director, North Nebraska Drouth Relief Committee, Final Report, Oct. 10, 1932, WJAG historical files (hereafter cited as WJAG papers).

<sup>14</sup> "Relief Fund Slows Up, Earnest Appeal Made," *Omaha World-Herald*, Feb. 7, 1932; "Drouth Relief Campaign Now Being Expanded;" "Special Radio Program to Ask Relief Fund Aid," *NDN*, Jan. 29, 1932.

<sup>15</sup> "We are Still with You,' is Radio Message," *NDN*, Jan. 29, 1932.

<sup>16</sup> "Food for People of Drouth Region Sent Out Monday," *NDN*, Feb. 22, 1932; "More Foodstuffs on Way to Drouth Area," *NDN*, Mar. 30, 1932; "Drouth Relief Work in Area Nearing Finish," *NDN*, Apr. 6, 1932.

<sup>17</sup> Art Thomas, personal journal, WJAG papers.

<sup>18</sup> *Congressional Record* 84, pt. 2 (Jan. 9, 1939): 51.

<sup>19</sup> "WJAG Planning Ceremonies on 10th Birthday," *NDN*, July 5, 1932. Miss Prosperity Wins

Nomination on WJAG Program, WJAG anniversary broadcast, July 17, 1932, WJAG papers; "Miss Prosperity Wins Nomination on WJAG Program," *NDN*, July 18, 1932.

<sup>20</sup> Stefan, Ten Years on the Air, WJAG anniversary broadcast, July 17, 1932, WJAG papers.

<sup>21</sup> WJAG, Rates for Time on Tenth Anniversary Program, WJAG anniversary program, July 17, 1932, WJAG papers.

<sup>22</sup> "Radio Flashes," *NDN*, Dec. 17, 1932; Dec. 29, 1932; Nov. 2, 1933; Apr. 9, 1946; "Mill is Asset to Farmers of N. E. Nebraska," *NDN*, Feb. 27, 1933; "Voice of the Street," *NDN*, June 12, 1933.

<sup>23</sup> *Congressional Record* 84, pt. 2 (Jan. 9, 1939): 52.

<sup>24</sup> "Will Quiz Norfolk People Over Radio," *NDN*, Dec. 16, 1932; "Radio Flashes," *NDN*, Dec. 17, 1932; Dec. 2, 1933; Jan. 14, 1933; Karl Stefan's Speech, WJAG anniversary broadcast, July 25, 1937, WJAG papers.

<sup>25</sup> The final "Voice of the Street" column appeared in the *News* on Nov. 15, 1937. "Voice of the Street" promotional ad, *NDN*, Dec. 17, 1932; "Tell How Depression Affects Way of Life," *NDN*, Jan. 11, 1933; "Voice of the Street," *NDN*, Jan. 16, 1933; May 17, 1933; Nov. 15, 1937; "Voice of Street' is Ally of Cupid," *NDN*, Dec. 28, 1933.

<sup>26</sup> Radio code classes did not appear on "Radio Flashes" schedules after 1932. "Will Send Code by Radio from 'WJAG' Station," *NDN*, Jan. 2, 1923; "WJAG School of Telegraphy Opens Monday," *NDN*, Jan. 28, 1930; "Radio School Class will Graduate Soon," *NDN*, Apr. 17, 1931; "Radio School Commencement is Held Friday," *NDN*, Apr. 2, 1932; "Epochal Event in Radio History is Held by WJAG," *NDN*, Apr. 9, 1928; "Unique Radio Program Heard by Kiwanians," *NDN*, Dec. 15, 1936.

<sup>27</sup> National Affairs, *Time*, June 19, 1933; Otis L. Graham, Jr. and Elizabeth Koed, "National Industrial Recovery Act," in *Encyclopedia of the American Presidency*, ed. Leonard W. Levy and Louis Fisher (New York: Simon & Schuster, 1994), 3:1057–58; "Karl Stefan Named on Recovery Board," *NDN*, Aug. 2, 1933; "Recovery Board Organized with Nine Districts," *NDN*, Aug. 23, 1933.

<sup>28</sup> "WJAG Application Filed at Capital," *NDN*, July 14, 1933; "Rebroadcasting Tests Successful," *NDN*, Aug. 5, 1933; "10 Men Needed to Broadcast Contest," *NDN*, Oct. 20, 1933; Madison County Cornhusking Contest promotional ad, *NDN*, Oct. 21, 1933.

<sup>29</sup> "Radio Flashes," *NDN*, May 16, 1932; June 6, 1932; Jan. 16, 1933; Feb. 23, 1933; "Little German Band Scores Hit on Radio," *NDN*, Apr. 3, 1933.

<sup>30</sup> "Security State Bank Held Up," *NDN*, Oct. 26, 1933; "2 Suspects in Bank Robbery Not Identified," *NDN*, Oct. 30, 1933; "Dudschus Praises Police and WJAG," *NDN*, Oct. 27, 1933.

<sup>31</sup> Gene Huse and his wife accompanied the

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Stefans on the 1934 tour of Central and parts of South America. "Stefans will Visit Several Countries," *NDN*, Jan. 24, 1934; "Dust Storm Rages Over Wide Region," *NDN*, Feb. 3, 1934; "Torrid Wave is Shattered; Dust Storm General," *NDN*, June 1, 1934; "High Wind Hits N. E. Nebraska; Rain is Light," *NDN*, June 20, 1934; "Storm Damage in This City is Repaired," *NDN*, Aug. 20, 1934.

Karl Stefan's daughter, Ida Mae Askren, says the 1934 trip, the first extended vacation for her parents in many years, was "nothing luxurious." Although Stefan was a "good businessman" who operated a cigar store, worked as a WJAG announcer, and wrote articles for wire services and magazines in the early 1930s, Askren asserts the family lived a "very modest" life. By 1951 Askren says her father's sole source of income was a \$10,000 annual congressional salary. Ida Mae Askren, Park Ridge, Ill., telephone interview by author, Nov. 10, 1997.

<sup>32</sup> "Radio Flashes" program schedules list Art Thomas as the substitute noon news announcer from February 3 through late March. "Stefans Return from Long 6-Weeks' Trip," *NDN*, Mar. 19, 1934; "Radio Flashes," *NDN*, Feb. 3, 1934; Mar. 24, 1934; "May Shatters Many Weather Records Here," *NDN*, June 2, 1934; "Relief from Torrid Wave is Promised," *NDN*, May 31, 1934; "1934 Rainfall is 6.28 Inches Below Normal," *NDN*, June 27, 1934; "Farmers Can Use Contracted Land Now for Pasture," *NDN*, May 26, 1934.

<sup>33</sup> "Williams Gives His Report on Drouth Survey," *NDN*, June 4, 1934.

<sup>34</sup> "Mercury Soars to 106; Equals 1934 High Mark," *NDN*, June 28, 1934; "Mercury Leaps to 113; Sets New Record Here," *NDN*, July 20, 1934; ".67 of Inch of Rain Joyfully Received Here," *NDN*, July 26, 1934; "Heat Wave Broken But Rain Lacking," *NDN*, July 27, 1934.

<sup>35</sup> "Station WJAG Offers Service to Farmers," *NDN*, Aug. 15, 1934; "Farmers' Feed Worries being Solved by WJAG," *NDN*, Aug. 25, 1934.

<sup>36</sup> "Karl Stefan Urged to Run for Congress," *NDN*, June 26, 1934. *Congressional Record* 84, pt. 2 (Jan. 9, 1939): 51.

<sup>37</sup> "Karl Stefan to Enter Campaign for Congressman," *NDN*, July 3, 1934.

<sup>38</sup> James Denney, "He Rode Radio to Congress," *Sunday World-Herald Magazine of the Midlands*, Oct. 29, 1972; Bob Thomas, interview by author, July 14, 1997.

<sup>39</sup> The Radio Act of 1927 and Communications Act of 1934 state: "If any licensee shall permit any person who is a legally qualified candidate for any public office to use a broadcasting station, he shall afford equal opportunities to all other such candidates for that office in the use of such broadcasting station." Although Stefan appeared on WJAG daily as an announcer and newscaster in the 1934 congressional campaign, close scrutiny of such a broadcast "use" by the courts and the Federal Communications Commission had not occurred in 1934. It is unclear if WJAG permitted Stefan's opponents opportunities to "use" WJAG's facilities based on his daily on-air appearances. "Enthusiasm is Pronounced at Stefan Rally," *NDN*, Sept. 28, 1934; "Radio Flashes," *NDN*, Aug. 18, 1934; "Politicians Ask Stefan Secrets of His Campaign," *NDN*, Nov. 9, 1934; T. Barton Carter, Marc A. Franklin, and Jay B. Wright, *The First Amendment and the Fourth Estate, The Law of Mass Media* (Westbury, New York: The Foundation Press, 1904), 712-13, 721-22.

<sup>40</sup> "Stefan for Congress Clubs being Formed," *NDN*, July 9, 1934; "Karl Stefan Clubs to be Formed Soon," *NDN*, July 17, 1934; "Four More Stefan Clubs are Formed," *NDN*, July 31, 1934; "Stefan Club Now has 276 Members," *NDN*, Aug. 6, 1934; "Club Formed to Back Karl Stefan," *NDN*, Aug. 11, 1934; "Karl Stefan is Winner by Huge Margin," *NDN*, Aug. 15, 1934; "Candidates in Primaries," *NDN*, July 6, 1934.

<sup>41</sup> "Karl Stefan Addresses Large Crowd," *Emerson* (Nebr.) *Tri-County Press*, Aug. 23, 1934; "Thousands Attend the Bloomfield Free Day," *Bloomfield* (Nebr.) *Monitor*, Aug. 30, 1934; "Fair in Wayne Proves Success," *Wayne* (Nebr.) *Herald*, Sept. 20, 1934.

<sup>42</sup> "Thin Gruel Served in New Deal Cause in Congressional Race," *Wayne Herald*, Sept. 20, 1934; Graham and Koed, "New Deal," in *Encyclopedia of the American Presidency*, 3: 1072-75. "Big Gathering Greeted Stefan Here Tuesday," *Humphrey* (Nebr.) *Democrat*, Oct. 11, 1934.

<sup>43</sup> Karl Stefan, Humphrey Speech, Oct. 9, 1934, Karl Stefan papers, Nebraska State Historical Society, Lincoln.

<sup>44</sup> "Stefan Tells Voters About His Platform," *NDN*, Oct. 19, 1934; Denney, "He Rode Radio to Congress," 9; *Congressional Record* 84, pt. 2 (Jan. 9, 1939): 51.

<sup>45</sup> Denney, "He Rode Radio to Congress," 9; *Biographical Directory of the United States Congress, 1774-1989, Bicentennial Edition* (Washington: GPO, 1989), 1217; "Edgar Howard Pleads for Roosevelt Cause," *NDN*, Nov. 7, 1932.

<sup>46</sup> Stefan campaign ad, *NDN*, Nov. 1, 1934; "Stefan Given Big Reception at Columbus," *NDN*, Oct. 22, 1934; "Throng Cheers Karl Stefan at Neligh Meeting," *NDN*, Oct. 29, 1934.

<sup>47</sup> "Stefan Rally Friday to be County Wide," *NDN*, Oct. 30, 1934.

<sup>48</sup> "Stefan Rally Biggest Ever Held in Norfolk," *NDN*, Nov. 6, 1934; *Congressional Quarterly, Congressional Quarterly's Guide to U.S. Elections* (Washington: Congressional Quarterly Inc., 1994), 1176; "Democrats Sweep to Victory in Nebraska," "Stefan Winner in Landslide," *NDN*, Nov. 7, 1934.

<sup>49</sup> Editorial, *Columbus* (Nebr.) *Daily Telegram*, Nov. 7, 1934; "Howard Wants Radio Stations to Pay Tax," *NDN*, Dec. 15, 1934.

<sup>50</sup> Karl Stefan to Gene Huse, copy, May 31, 1935, Stefan papers.

<sup>51</sup> "Politicians Ask Stefan Secrets of His Campaign;" "Stefan No Longer Paid Announcer," *NDN*, Nov. 10, 1934; "Karl Stefan is to Leave Here about Dec. 23," *NDN*, Nov. 23, 1934; Huse to Stefan, copy, Jan. 11, 1935, Stefan papers.

<sup>52</sup> "Karl Stefan Sets Old Rumor at Rest," *NDN*, Dec. 5, 1934.

<sup>53</sup> Jerry Fricke, "Colorful Mickey Recalls Old Days," *NDN*, June 13, 1960; Mickey the Farm Poet and Philosopher, In Honor of Karl Stefan, n.d., WJAG papers.

<sup>54</sup> *Congressional Quarterly's Guide*, 1181, 1186, 1191, 1195, 1201, 1206, 1211, 1215.