

**'MUSICAL PICTURES' SAVED FROM BOARD OF EDUCATION BASEMENT**

# Man rescues radio program once played in schools

**By Anna Patrick**  
Staff writer

Long before televisions hung on school walls, a more understated medium held center stage in the classroom: the radio.

Ed Johnson, now in his 60s, can still remember sitting in his desk at Ford Elementary in Dunbar with the lights dimmed listening as the classroom's radio played the local program "Musical Pictures."

Sitting snug in his seat, he would be transported to a working farm or take a trip to the rodeo. He would listen to classical music by famous composers such as Tchaikovsky as the program's narrator, Ned Skaff, helped to create mental images of snow falling or lightning strikes.

The program's "A Summer Storm" episode prompted the students to "Close your eyes and see if you can feel the heat of a summer day. There is the fresh smell of newly cut grass, and the air is filled with the buzzing and whining noises of the bees and flies in search of water — it hasn't rained in a week."

Through the use of narration and classical music, "Musical Pictures" covered a topic, or set a scene or retold a classic story to elementary students in Kanawha County classrooms every week.

The program, designed mainly for students in first, second and third grades, encouraged teachers to allow students to create a form of artwork after listening to the program. It could be anything — a painting, pencil sketch, poem or story.

The weekly 15-minute program was produced by WCHS-AM and the Junior League of Charleston in partnership with the Kanawha County school system. The program's 1963 manual for teachers instructs: "As soon as the program is over let the children begin on their art work or writing before the inspiration is GONE. Techniques are not important. Imagination is."

The program ended in the 1960s, but it formed a lasting impact on Johnson.

"I developed a love for music partly from my mother, 'Musical Pictures' and [Charleston High School music teacher] Mary Jean Barnes," Johnson said.

"'Musical Pictures' was such a big influence that later on I just thought, 'Well, if I can find out anything about these programs, I'd like to.'"

While teaching business at West Virginia University-Parkersburg in the '80s, Johnson began the search for the "Musical Pictures" recordings.

He first visited the Kanawha County Public Library. No luck. He went to the Kanawha County

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Board of Education after learning from WCHS staff that the recordings had been given to the school system.

After some serious digging in the basement of a Board of Education annex building on Lee Street in Charleston, he departed the site carrying a box of reel-to-reel recordings as well as old teacher manuals that accompanied the programming.

He found "Musical Pictures" tucked in a corner in a tiny basement room, as well as the recordings of "Our Musical Heritage" and "Know Your State/Exploring Your State/Your State" — other radio programs produced in the '50s and '60s by WCHS in partnership with the Junior League of Charleston.

At the time, Johnson used the most-modern technology to transfer the recordings to cassette tapes. He returned the original recordings to the Board of Education and kept the cassettes safe in his home.

"I just had it in my mind that someday it would be a good thing to reproduce for a modern audience."

Then, Johnson moved to Florida to pursue employment at the Walt Disney World Resort, near Orlando. His mother moved down there as well.

His life moved forward, but the recordings stayed in their box.

Eventually, Johnson and his mother missed the West Virginia hills.

"When the tallest mountains are named Space, Splash and Thunder, it's not the same. You get homesick."

And just as on his move south, the box of "Musical Pictures" recordings came back with Johnson.

He and his mother moved to Morgantown to be close to his sister. He took care of his mother until her death.

And then, when he could finally catch his breath, Johnson found the old box of recordings, more than 20 years after his initial basement discovery.

With assistance, the "Musical Pictures," "Know Your State" and "Our Musical Heritage" recordings in Johnson's possession were turned into digital copies. With the help of a website developer, MusicalPictures.org was launched in 2014 and offers visitors the ability to listen to episodes from the various programs.

For those who remember listening

to "Musical Pictures" in the classroom, Johnson hopes listening to Skaff's narration more than 60 years after its production brings back pleasant memories of a simpler time. "I hope they remember some good times when they were kids. I hope they are able to pass on the love of music."

A few years ago, Johnson learned that the original copies of the three radio programs had been destroyed. "I talked with Pam Mullins of the superintendent's office and she said many years ago they made [the recordings] available. If teachers wanted it, they could get it. Nobody wanted it."

As he far he knows, his copies are the only form of archive of the countless hours and hard work spent by the producers of WCHS and the women of the Junior League to develop enriching curriculum for Kanawha County youths.

Why do it? Why even begin such a project? "Why do people climb that mountain?" Johnson said. "I had the ability. I had the information. It doesn't do any good sitting in a box if it's not available. It doesn't help anybody. ..."

"I hope that we don't lose sight of the arts being important in our lives."

To listen to "Musical Pictures" episodes, visit [www.musicalpictures.org](http://www.musicalpictures.org).

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