

THE ELEANOR ROOSEVELT PROGRAM

February 1st. 1951

Description: In the opening segment, ER and Elliott Roosevelt respond to a listener's question about volunteer civilian defense program. In the interview segment, ER's guest is Elmore McKee, creator of radio series "The People Act."

Participants: ER, Elliott Roosevelt, Elmore McKee

[Elliott Roosevelt:] Mother today uh I have a question uh that has been sent in that I think would be rather interesting to discuss, uh we've talked about it previously on other programs but uh I think that now it is even more important to talk about it. It's said that in New York volunteers have been very slow about joining in the city's civilian defense program. It would be helpful perhaps if-if you'd be ki-good enough to talk about some of the work volunteer civilian defense workers did during World War Two in England, and especially in London.

[ER:] Well, uh I could do that but I'm uh wondering whether it isn't picking up in this country. Because I was speaking to Mrs. [Elizabeth Agnes] Impellitteri the other day and she told me they were beginning to get um a good deal better cooperation and people were coming in to learn. I think at first it's always slow because the immediate um threat isn't upon us. It's just like starting civilian defense in the last war when nobody really felt that it was immediately upon them. But when they thought that a plane had flown over San Francisco the whole West Coast was ready to organize [Elliott Roosevelt: That's right.] overnight. And --

[Elliott Roosevelt:] I remember that very well.

[ER:] And uh they even-- um uh Mayor LaGuardia flew out there, and I flew out with him and there was a whole uh we found great readiness, great readiness to organize and it's always I think slow at the start because people are busy with their own things, and the idea, unless it's put down in black and white, this is what you can do. Now they're beginning to do that. I saw that um they were beginning to say we need people to do just so and so [Elliott Roosevelt: Mhm.] oh, and I think the more that develops um the more quickly you will get organization but you will not get full time uh giving by people of um of work until it's an essential. Now what happened in England was that very wisely I think um they chose a woman, the government chose a woman, who had foresight and imagination long before uh any actual attack had come. They sent her over here to study some of the things we had done because of the depression [Elliott Roosevelt: Mhm.] and then they told her to prepare, on paper, a plan um with as much uh inclusion of uh all the things that she felt might be necessary.

[Elliott Roosevelt:] Who was this woman and why was she selected?

[ER:] Well it was Lady Stella Reading, the Dowager Marchioness of Reading. And um she was the widow of um Lord Reading who'd been um in India as um representative of the government there, and who was here at one time as Ambassador and um she has been uh head of the organization uh in England of women uh the Women's Voluntary Services uh from that time on [Elliott Roosevelt: Mhm.] and she has adapted that organization to the needs of whatever the time was. She had her plans ready and she had her key people chosen before England was attacked [Elliott Roosevelt: Mhm.]. The day England was attacked they mobilized in every little town and village. Um they had made their surveys they'd chosen their key people and uh the telegrams went out and of course as the rest of the mobilization, the going

underground, the necessary um uh communication services and all the other things were mobilized-- they mobilized right along with them. And their women did uh canteen work, their women helped in the hospitals, their women um were present, I don't know whether how many women in this country uh remember the way in which they moved into a bombed area uh they moved in with um, we often provided from this country the actual trucks that went in but when an-a place was bombed uh there was no one to do the laundry, there was no water, there was no one to do the cooking and they moved in with a trailer that did laundry, that did cooking, that arranged outdoor cooking. They were all trained people [Elliott Roosevelt: Mhm] and when they left that place uh they had started them up doing these things on a community basis for themselves until they could get back into individual ways of life. And in country areas they knew that it was essential that as much um work went on in the fields as possible, so they organized to feed the children who went to school at noon so the mothers wouldn't have to come back out of the fields and get dinner [Elliott Roosevelt: Mhm.] and to take dinner out to the fields, for the men and women in the fields. And all over of course very quickly um they tried to move children

[Elliott Roosevelt coughs] out of big cities, people gave their country homes and uh I stayed in a home where uh the family had kept only a very small part of a very old fashioned big country house, which was turned over to the care of children. In many ways that was the most educational thing that happened I think in Great Britain because they discovered what um life in the slums of their big cities was like

[Elliott Roosevelt: Yes.] when they suddenly came in contact with the children from those areas. And there were so many things that the women had to do that this organization kept on developing

[Elliott Roosevelt: Mhm.]. Uh now since the end of the war um it is still at work [Elliott Roosevelt: Yes.]. It's still, it's now trying to earn dollars by work that the women do in their own homes that is sold in this country and they get the regular pay it's organized so as to not compete with labor in any way. They get regular pay for the hours of work they do in their own homes and they sell everything in this country for dollars which come back [Elliott Roosevelt: Mhm.] to their country. So she's never stopped uh organizing for each new thing as it came. (7:11)

[Elliott Roosevelt:] Well I know uh, I happened to have been in London during the last part of the blitz in 1941 when uh, I think it was the latter part of May of forty-one and was in on some of the heavy bombings that went on at that time. They seemed very heavy to me and I visited uh uh with one of the chiefs of the volunteer firefighters groups. One of the volunteer fire--firefighting stations uh down in the old London section [ER: Yes.] which as you remember was largely wiped out.

[ER:] Well they burned all around [Elliott Roosevelt coughing] Saint Paul's Cathedral you see. [Unclear term].

[Elliott Roosevelt:] Yes, and uh it was very interesting to me how highly organized they were of course the war at that--that time had been going uh on for uh really almost a year and a half as far as England was concerned but the blitz itself had been going on for uh over a year. And they were so very highly organized because uh they, the volunteer firefighters were uh by far the largest adjunct of the fire departments because the fire--regular fire department of London was much too small to handle the [ER: oh.] heavy uh firefighting needs that the bombings r--required. So that uh uh it seems to me that the civilian defense programs of our various communities in the United States must take into account the enlisting of men and women because I noticed that women were just as important in these firefighting units as the men.

[ER:] Oh yes they were trained. I remember seeing the type of training that was given to the women for firefighting [Elliott Roosevelt: Yes.]. And it was extremely interesting and um then they also uh added to their police force [Elliott Roosevelt: Oh yes.] by giving the women training uh as police women.

[Elliott Roosevelt:] Well actually you saw more uh women police uh uh constables uh on the streets in London than you did of the traditional Bobby, because most of the Bobbies' who were of military age were already in the armed services.

[ER:] Well it uh it women came in of course to all kinds of-- they ran if I remember correctly and I think you do, I think women ran almost all transportation in England [ER and Elliott Roosevelt overlap] at that time.

[Elliott Roosevelt:] Oh very definitely. As a matter of fact Princess Elizabeth belonged to one of the transportation units. (9:48)

[ER:] Oh I remember, she learned how to uh keep her truck in order [Elliott Roosevelt: That's right.] if I remember rightly.

[ER laughs]

[Elliott Roosevelt:] And uh, in actuality, the-the handling of big trucks, the great big trucks that were used for the transportation of war goods and all over England uh were handled by women.

[ER:] Oh I remember that well. I stood in the pouring rain [Elliott Roosevelt coughs] and watched every type of vehicle that a woman ran in England pass by me in-in review [Elliott Roosevelt: Yeah.] so that I should know what they did as well as see their repair work.

[Elliott Roosevelt:] So that uh in actuality the-the interesting training that can go on for men and women who are uh not eligible for military or uh defense manufacturing capacities is almost unlimited and uh can be of tremendous interest in uh the communities and organizations of civilian defense uh should start uh the programs of training now as Lady Reading did [ER and Elliott Roosevelt overlap] long before the war.

[ER:] Do you--Do you [overlapping ends] one branch. I remember one branch, I remember one branch that particularly interested me and that was the group of young women who took the planes of pilots who came back from missions and distributed them round to different airfields. Either for repair or reconditioning or-or uh going--just going over ready for--[Elliott Roosevelt: That's right.] and then delivered them back to the point where they were supposed to be. And that isn't as simple as it sounds in England because uh fog is an almost permanent [ER laughs] presence [Elliott Roosevelt: That's right.] in that country and all the fields begin to look alike when you have a fog, a low-lying fog, all the little fields look just the same [Elliott Roosevelt: Well now--] I remember watching some of those girls were American girls [Elliott Roosevelt: Mhm.] That's right. Volunteers.] I remember. Some came from Canada. But they were volunteers.

[Elliott Roosevelt:] Well I'm afraid we have to cut it short now because we're already cutting in on the time of another part of the program. (11:56)

[Elliott Roosevelt:] To many people uh who live in other parts of the world, democracy is simply a familiar word. To those of us who live in a democracy and who believe in it and practice it democracy is a way of life we would like everyone to know about and to understand. Today's guest Mr. Elmore McKee has conceived an idea that will bring to life examples of democracy which happen every day in our country. *The People Act* is a recorded radio series in which Mr. McKee tells real life stories of actual people in actual American communities and how they work together by democratic methods to solve some of the economic and social problems confronting them. This is an unusual idea, Mr. McKee, and we

want our audience to meet you and hear you tell about it and I know Mother has many questions that she wants to ask you. Mother will you take over at this point?

[ER:] Yes, I'm very glad to have you with us Mr. McKee.

[Elmore McKee:] I'm very glad to be here Mrs. Roosevelt.

[ER:] Well now we start right in on the questions. You would like I'm sure to tell us what is the purpose of *The People Act* program?

[Elmore McKee:] Well I think you might say that the purpose of the program is to show democracy in action. To isolate the essential processes at group levels in local communities and hold those up to America and the world and say this is it, do this in your town. I remember that Drew Pearson once said that what Russia fears most is not the atom bomb but the triumph of American ideals. Well we're trying in positive constructive ways to show specifically what the essence of American way of life is.

[ER:] I think that your-your uh uh quite right in believing that it's essential to do it and um that it is one of the things that uh Russia fears, because uh they um I-I uh think, like to egg us on to doing things that are un-democratic just so they can point out that we have done them afterwards. How did the idea originate?

[Elmore McKee:] May I be a little personal at that point? It happened that during 1947 I was working with the American Friends Service Committee, the Quakers in Germany. One hot afternoon in June we were opening our self-help neighborhood center rooted in shoe repairing and that so forth in Frankfurt, Germany. We were having a meeting of our directors and the question of a laundry was coming up and I suggested that a committee of three be appointed to direct the laundry and plan it. One to consist of a social worker, another a laundry expert and another, a um a working mother of the neighborhood who would actually use the machines. My motion was unanimously voted down on the theory as expressed by one of the members that in Germany we leave things to the experts. That night in the home of my best friend, the welfare commissioner in Frankfurt, I said to Doctor Prestel "That is the difference between your country and mine. In Germany you tend to leave things to the experts in America we consult everyone concerned." He said "Is that what you mean by democracy?" I said "Yes." he said "I've been waiting for a year and a half to understand just what it meant. We will try to make these Quaker centers in eleven cities laboratories to which Germans can come and see all kinds of people concerned with a particular issue taking responsibility." When I got back to this country I felt that we needed, in this country as well, to point out by the project method, how everybody concerned with an issue, in many cases, in this country does have a chance to get busy and solve it. If we don't leave it to the experts, but we take it to the people, and that experience in rubble Germany happens to have been in my mind the germinal spot in which this program you might say idea took root.

[ER:] Well of course I've watched the Quakers for many years, uh work in just that way um first of all in the coal areas of this country I remember uh a chair making project [ER Laughs] in a certain part of West Virginia which was set up in just that same way. So that it uh it's a very familiar way to me and I think it is the vital democratic way, well now that you're producing this program I would like to ask you um about the Twentieth Century Fund which cooperates with the National Broadcasting Company in the production. (16:36)

[Elmore McKee:] Well when I took my idea to NBC with reference to dramatizing group processes at local levels they sent me to the Twentieth Century Fund for possible sponsorship. The fund was established by Mr. Filene (Edward A. Filene) of Boston in 1919 to increase the understanding of American of the facts of our economic system. To increase economic literacy and not to be a-fra-a-fraid of uh areas of conflict believing that those were the areas where enlightenment was needed. So they are

underwriting what are called the out of pocket costs of these programs and cooperating with public affairs NBC the living 1951 uh program section.

[ER:] I am old enough to remember Mr. Edward Filene and I had great respect for him. I think his idea in establishing this fund was a very good one. Now what would interest me and I'm sure it would interest our audience is to know how you discover uh where the projects are going on, which you bring onto your program or tell about on your program.

[Elmore McKee:] Well I suppose in the first place that one knows a number of them himself, uh I happen to have a few suggestions, which I investigated of my own. But in the main I went to top level individuals and organizations across the country and said to them where can I go in these United States and find uh the democratic processes at work uh that you can tell me about for instance the head of the Soil Conservation Service in Washington, Doctor Bennet, sent me to Sylvania, Arkansas saying I think that is one of the finest soil conservation projects that we've got. And the National Committee on the Public School sent me to Haden Township, New Jersey for a very good school story. So by in large we consulted people who were apt to know where the most interesting projects were and then I went and did research on them and later went back with script writer Lou Hassam to do the actual interviewing and recording.

[ER:] Well that's a very good way I think to do it. But I believe that you could in almost every community in this country find projects if you went in and made a study of the community. What was the basis of your choice of projects?

[Elmore McKee:] That's a very interesting question. Uh essentially, from an external point of view, I was looking for a group, uh a group of people who, and you'll find that this that all of this all of these thirteen projects will bear out this analysis. There is a group of people of varied and sometimes conflicting backgrounds who see or hear of big need and they get together to meet the need and they work at it with all kinds of internal clashes but in the long run you find this group of people growing in trust for each other, respect for each other, in friendliness and in solidarity. Now looked at from an internal point of view what do I see these people doing? I see they are revealing individual initiative. Secondly, that they are taking responsibility. Thirdly, that they are doing it together that is the cooperative fact is there and finally, that there is community spirit resulting from the thing that we are isolating and-and dramatizing. The members of it have a greater interest in the community as a result of it and the whole community is tied together around the project to some extent. Uh I have deliberately uh singled out the group for special emphasis because I believe that one of the great bulwarks of our democracy is the group. I think that it-- the group is the fulfillment of the individual and in a sense the protection against undo government control. I'm sure that a dictator would abolish all of these autonomous groups at local levels, and I think we need in America some way, of making awards, academy awards if you will. Not simply to individuals who reach great points of distinction but to groups; and this program is, in a sense, an attempt to make an award to that great missing link between the individual and the state namely the vital autonomous group.

[ER:] Well I like very much your emphasis on the small group, uh uh I'd like you to develop a little your idea of the importance of the small group in our democracy.

[Elmore McKee:] Well if you will listen to our story of-of forty veterans at Loraine, Ohio building houses. You'll find there that these-these-these rather rugged type of individual, very much down to earth, all of them needing houses and forced to live in crowded conditions, that they have worked together for three years putting in a hundred thousand hours of overtime work after their steel mill job is done building these houses. Now their families and their kids are behind them and you can go there and analyze Al Lash and Don Poplar and all the rest of them with their various backgrounds and you can see, how as one of them uh said to me on tape, a Scotchman named Broadford he said 'I guess there's a kind of a Christianity in this we've found a bond as we've slogged it out here in the mud and built these houses. A

lot of us didn't like each other but we've gotten together around a common job' there's initiative there's responsibility there's teamwork and there's a new feeling for the whole community.

[Elliott Roosevelt:] Excuse me just a minute Mother. Before you ask your next question I think we should stop for just a second uh for a station break and to hear a few messages from the people that make this program possible for our listeners.

[ER:] [ER laughs] oh all right. (22:14)

[Elliott Roosevelt:] Excuse me, Mother [Elliott laughs] [ER: Yes.], but I think I'd like to remind our audience that it's time for us to return to our very interesting discussion with Mr. Elmore McKee.

[ER:] I'm so interested, I wanted to start right in before you had time to remind [ER laughs] the audience, um Mr. McKee I'm very much interested in what you told us about that group of veterans building their homes because it happens that um a very small group in Arden, Delaware came to me the other day um saying that they uh had acquired some land and had a little money which they'd each put in to buy their first um uh-- to dig their first cellar and start their first um uh building and then 'they would be able get a loan and go on from house to house and everyone was contributing their own labor uh for everybody's house, and they wanted to borrow a little money to buy materials um I think it was the small sum of five thousand dollars at one percent. And I tried to get that loan and I haven't been able to get a single person interested and I think that it's largely because people on the whole would rather go into things that are big, they think then this is going to succeed. And I'm interested in the emphasis you're laying on the small groups initiative because from my point of view that's the basis of democracy. What do you think?

[Elmore McKee:] Um, I'm so glad that we agree completely about that. And I think that it's--there's a gap in our social thinking at that point to some extent. Now if you take these veterans you'll find that they had the same experience to start with that your friends have. Namely, they were not able to get anybody to advance the money anywhere in the United States. The only way they could get their houses was to but up five hundred dollars apiece and go to work and build one then when one was finished a Lorain Bank (Lorain National Bank) said we will loan you the money for a second one.

[ER:] That's what these people were hoping for but they had to put up the five hundred dollars to buy the land, and uh then they got a little bit of a loan um for digging the first cellar but not enough, they had a chance to buy quite a lot of materials and they were afraid it would go up uh in price but they haven't been able to get the money [ER: laughs].

[Elmore McKee:] I'm sure that the Self-Help Housing Committee of the American Friends Service Committee would be glad to council with them with reference to their experience at Penn-Craft in Pennsylvania and at Lorain, Ohio because the friends have again consulted with this group and helped them in the--in Ohio.

[ER:] Well now are they ah helping you also in the production of your program or how did you get your program material together.

[Elmore McKee:] Uh I went personally and spent three or four days in each one of these thirteen places, wrote it up and then NBC script writer Lou Hassam and I went back and spent some more days with a little minute tape recording machine and we interviewed dozens of people at great length and these shows are built out of tape. No, the American Friends Service Committee not specifically helping in the production [ER: They're not.] NBC's Living 1951 Unit is helping the Twentieth Century Fund do it.

[ER:] I see, well now what was the reaction of the local communities from which you drew your material? I mean when you went in I don't suppose you always decided um when you first went into a place that that was going to be a place you would use, but you must have rejected some [cough] communities you went into. But what was the local reaction did they want to cooperate, or were they antagonistic, or how did it--how did you feel about it?

[Elmore McKee:] They were all thrilled to cooperate uh because we--they felt that we were patting them a little bit on the back and they were ready to accept the democracy yardstick. When you asked them 'do you have democracy in your community?' they would say of course we do and then we'd say well let's go look at it in terms of specific actions and uh as a result of that in most of the communities I found-found them uh um using the project as a yardstick with which they could measure themselves. I'll give you three illustrations, when I left um a town in Alabama they said "'your visit has done us a good deal of good. Now what more do you think we should be doing in our community?'" And I was able, quite specifically, to suggest one or two things with reference to the interracial situation. In our Kansas town of Morganville, which is affiliated with a French town in France, when I left again they asked me what you think we should be doing and I suggested that they should besides having this beautiful affiliation with the French community that they should um uh try to bring over a French student to Kansas. And I find the same type of-of going beyond the specific project dramatized on the part of the women of Oklahoma and to some extent in our industrial stories. I think, perhaps, Mrs. Roosevelt that I should indicate that three of our thirteen programs are democracy and industry the rest deal with farms, housing, a county, a small Kansas town, in other-and a school, in other words they're community stories.

[ER:] Uh have you been encouraged on the whole? You must have traveled many miles in this country have you been encouraged by your travels? (27:37)

[Elmore McKee:] Yes I think so. It's been a great experience for me personally. I have traveled about fifteen thousand miles in connection with the two or three trips. In a few places I'm discouraged by the lack of democracy and in one or two cases we decided not to do a project that was originally on our list. But in most cases it has given me great encouragement about the healthy state of the core of our country. One of the most interesting reactions came in the little Haddon Township [New Jersey] which is a suburb in Philadelphia, where people have just been digging in to get better schools in the face of politicians and others who didn't want to spend the money [coughing] And I think the final remark of Mrs. Francis Spaeth, a housewife, just as we left there. I said to Mrs. Spaeth, what has this struggle for new schools meant to you? Well, she said, for the first time in my life I have discovered the responsibility that goes with freedom. And that reaction Mrs. Roosevelt is fairly typical, uh I think democracy is really in a-a difficult plight unless people take responsibility and these programs are showing people in very specific local situations doing job that need to be done. And so I have been encouraged.

[ER:] Well of course I think that's one of the very great lessons to have learned because I think one of the troubles of democracy is that too many people think that um it's all privileges and no responsibility and that was one of the things that in the Declaration of Human Rights that other countries objected to. They said we should have put down the responsibilities that go with the privileges of human rights, uh we didn't do it in the Declaration because we felt that if you started enumerating all of the responsibilities you didn't get a chance to say what were the rights [ER laughs]. But nevertheless, in our own democracy I think that um it's very necessary that we actually feel the responsibility. (29:43)

[Elmore McKee:] The point is that democracy is still on trial. I think that of what a school master in Alabama said to me. He said, Mr. McKee you know perfectly well democracy still is on trial. And uh they get an awareness that the thing isn't all cut and dried and achieved and that if we don't really make it work then we are uh in really a bad way.

[Elliott Roosevelt:] Mr. McKee--

[ER:] You just have to sit in the United Nations a minute to know it was on trial. Go ahead Elliott.

[Elliott Roosevelt:] I'd like to ask a question. Do you, in traveling around the United States, feel that there's still a great lethargy on the part of the American public, or that there is an a-a beginning at least of an awaking uh of the responsibilities that the people have to make their democracy work?

[Elmore McKee:] I think there's a great deal of lethargy, but I think there's an increasing sense of responsibility. When I came back from Germany it was my conviction about the lack of awareness as to what democracy was that caused me to, sort of, dream up this idea and as a Canadian said to me the other day. If a program like this is on the air it'll bring tonic to America about what the essence American dream is [Elliott Roosevelt: Mhm.] and I was glad to find out yesterday that the Voice of America, beginning tomorrow, is carrying this series every Thursday.

[Elliott Roosevelt:] Yes--

[ER:] Well that will be good, [Elliott Roosevelt: Yes.] it will spread it 'round the world.

[Elmore McKee:] That's right, which indicates their value evaluation of this group technique of teaching democracy [Elliott Roosevelt: Yes.] this is the project method of education which is the best method there is.

[ER:] Yes.

[Elliott Roosevelt and Elmore McKee overlap.]

[Elmore McKee:] You learn by doing.

[Elliott Roosevelt:] It seems to me-- It seems to me that uh the idea in back of this can be spread through so many different other uh programs, for instance eh uh the soap opera, the--which is forever one of the banes of existence of radio, but still at the same time is one of the most popular things in radio, with the average American listener-- uh that so much could be done in the soap opera to bring home the responsibilities of the individual to his community and to his-his whole life and to making democracy work in-- at the level at which they're writing these stories.

[ER:] Well now I wonder, I don't think in thirteen weeks you can really um get this whole picture across, eh what are your plans. Will the program continue? And what uh results do you really anticipate from the program as a whole?

[Elmore McKee:] Well as you know Mrs. Roosevelt, educational radio is having a hard time you might say, [ER: Mhm.] in-in-in-in the commercial field. But, I think thus far the response to this program has been unusually significant. I mentioned the fact the Voice of America is going to rebroadcast. Uh Teacher's College Columbia [University] is using our scripts in their citizenships pro-citizenship program. The Office of Education in Washington hopes to make platters of these show records available. Uh the Pan-American Union is considering the materials for translation into-- uh for use in South American community seminars. [ER: Well that's good.] I have a letter here from Alaska uh just came in today and there are various other indications of-of carry over interest, now we hope that this will-show the kind of radio education of which more is needed and somewhere doing it will be found.

[ER:] Well I think that's very encouraging [Elliott Roosevelt: I-] I'm sorry [Elliott Roosevelt: I-] our time has come to an end [Elliott Roosevelt: That's right.] I see Elliott looking at me [ER laughs].

[Elliott Roosevelt:] I'm afraid that I have to step in at this point and say that our time is running out.

[ER:] Well then I-- all I can do is thank you so much for coming and tell you how deeply interested I am in this whole series of programs.

[Elmore McKee:] Thank you very much.

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