

THE ELEANOR ROOSEVELT PROGRAM

November 9, 1950

Description: In the interview segment, ER interviews radio personality Lanny Ross.

Participants: ER, Lanny Ross

[ER:] I'm glad to see you again, Mr. Ross. When I learned you were to be my guest, I thought of Lanny Ross on the Show Boat, The Mississippi River. Whatever happened to that?

[Lanny Ross:] Well, we put the good old show boat up onto dry dock, Mrs. Roosevelt.

[ER:] Oh that's too bad, I think.

[Lanny Ross:] But you know it-it lives on in people's hearts. I don't believe there was ever a radio show, unless it's yours, that has uh come closer to the warmth of people's hearts. I meet taxi cab drivers today, I meet people in the different cities I travel to and they say, "oh yes, Lanny Ross on the Show Boat, say, why don't they bring that Show Boat back again!" [ER and Lanny Ross laugh]

[ER:] That's rather nice, I think. Well now, you have a farm, don't you, in Dutchess County which [Lanny Ross: I--] is near me.

[Lanny Ross:] I'm very proud to consider myself a near neighbor of yours. As a matter of fact, I was over to part of your country, it's past Rhinebeck and Lafayette and Red Hook, to watch some soil conversation work being--going on uh going on there.

[ER:] Yes, yes I know uh there has been. We've been working with the uh county agent, at least Elliott has, and I suppose you do too.

[Lanny Ross:] Yes, we are-we are all very happy to work and cooperate with them, we-we build dispersion ditches and we try to see that our woodlands are cleared. You-you raise--you're sort of a Santa Claus, aren't you, you raise Christmas trees?

[ER:] Well, I-I really should uh-uh let Elliott talk to you about that [Lanny Ross laughs] because he does all the farm work, I just have fun uh looking round and every now and then prodding a little bit here and there [ER laughs].

[Lanny Ross:] Every good farmer knows that a farmer's wife, or the lady of the farm, is very important in the operation of a farm [ER laughs].

[ER:] Well, that's nice of you to say, I'm not always sure myself. But um there is one time that I remember meeting you, perhaps you may forget, but I remember it very well. Do you remember New Caledonia? (2:03)

[Lanny Ross:] Yes, when you came over as the-as the head of the Red Cross to supervise the installations.

[ER:] Well, I wasn't really uh head of the Red Cross, but I'd ask the Red Cross uh head, who was Mr. [Norman] Davis at that time, if he would let me uh just look--uh come in uniform and look at the installations, [LR: Well--] which he did and report that.

[Lanny Ross:] As a-as a first lieutenant in the Army, I was led to believe you were the head. And we couldn't have rolled out the red carpet, and eh- eh, even more, had you not--had you been the head [ER and LR laugh] I- I think we were speaking about the fact that Admiral Halsey did resent the [ER: Oh.] presence of ladies in that area.

[ER:] I knew Admiral Halsey was terribly troubled, but--and he said so in his book!

[Lanny Ross:] Well, do you know really why?

[ER:] No.

[Lanny Ross:] He was worried, not because you're a lady, but because of the tremendous responsibility it placed on his command in case anything had happened to you. That was really it. (2:58)

[ER:] Oh, I'm sure of that, but I also think it must-it must have seemed an awful nuisance to have a woman come, and one--I used to be sorry for the poor little young officers now and then who tried so hard to make me comfortable and worried so when there wasn't really anything to worry about! (3:16)

[Lanny Ross:] Well, [Lanny Ross laughs] maybe-maybe we were afraid of having a-a lady come out and see what poor housekeepers we really were. You might-you might have found some dust under the carpet or something like that, you know?

[ER:] Oh, I don't believe I would've known! [ER laughs] And there weren't -- there weren't too many carpets were they?

[Lanny Ross:] No, not too many carpets.

[ER:] But uh Admiral Halsey felt better after I had been there because um, uh he-he was very kind in his book and said that he felt the trip had really been of value, which pleased me very much.

[Lanny Ross:] Well, I remember the long trip you had to take. You arrived at Tontouta in a C-54. It was the first large airship I'd ever seen in my life that was a new--a new vehicle. It just came out and it looked--it's called a "flying boxcar," and you have a big ladder to step down. I was on the field when you arrived, and my goodness it was a big ship. And there you came. Then we all got in limousines, except us, we got into weapons carriers and had the bumpiest trip. (4:11)

[ER:] You did have a bumpy trip?

[Lanny Ross:] [Lanny Ross laughs] We had a-a bumpy trip to uh a rest area, and I remember I wondered how you survived that, but you seemed to have done very well.

[ER:] Oh I survived all those things, those things I didn't mind at all. Uh I think I minded much more when I found that someone had been put out of uh what looked like a-a fairly comfortable room so that I could have it. And-[Lanny Ross laughs] and uh I never knew whether they were in a very uncomfortable room all those nights [ER laughs]. But um you do you--did you enjoy that?

[Lanny Ross:] Well I look back on it now as a beautiful dream, but it seems as if it happened to somebody else. Doesn't that seem the way to you?

[ER:] Yes, in a way I sometimes wonder how-how I really went through that trip because um I worked very hard because I wrote a column every night after everything was finished uh so that uh I was always up two hours longer than anybody else. But I think now we have to stop and let the sponsor have a word.

(Break from 5:13-5:26)

[ER:] I'm regarded, Mr. Ross, as a good deal of a traveler, but sometimes it seems to me that uh you've traveled a good deal yourself. What--could you tell me something about your travels?

[Lanny Ross:] Well, of course uh to begin with the stork--the stork brought me, I traveled there. But after that my-my father was an actor and of course, uh- uh an actor's life, that is, the child of an actor is proverbially one of great travel. I was-- I did travel in the trunk, [ER laughs] I believe my first recollection is Medicine Hat, way up in Canada on a wintry evening, being carried from the theater in a bundle, and I think that was the first time I ever noticed my breath could be seen in-in the street light, it was so cold that night. And uh [ER: My goodness, that's interesting.] well, that brought me to New York, that particular trip. Then my father went off again to travel and doing uh rural Shakespeare that kind of work, and he sent me away to school--

[ER:] Those were the days of traveling companies, really.

[Lanny Ross:] Yes, of course we still travel a great deal today, but in those days it was nothing to have a hundred road companies out on tour. Well, this particular trip he sent me to Canada to school for the summer and he uh gave the conductor my supper money [ER laughs]. But the conductor got off the train at around Harmon because they changed engines and things in those days and he got off, forgot all about the little boy whose money he had in his pocket. Along came the ice cream man later on, I allowed "oh I'd like to have some." He said, "Well son, you're going to have to sing for it." So I said, "That's alright with me." Stood up in the day coach, sang a few nursery rhymes, passed the hat, and got off the train with my ice cream and a dollar sixty-three [ER Laughs]. (7:10)

[ER:] That's a wonderful story, I think. Well, I can see that singing has played a big part in your life, and [Lanny Ross: It has.] [ER laughs] you probably can think of other times when you've sung for your supper.

[Lanny Ross:] Yes, it's an awfully good thing to be able to sing for the supper, just like Tommy Tucker. Speaking of traveling though, it-- my own travels have taken me to Europe seven times [ER coughs] in various ways. Such as the first time I wanted to go over, I got a job in- in the galley of one of the Holland American liners, but in the evening time I used to go up on deck in the lovely breezes and sing for the passengers and crew. And later on I uh ran against Oxford and Cambridge when I was on the Yale track team. And then the following year, I had the difficult decision of going with the Olympic team or else singing with the Yale Glee Club.

[ER:] That must have been a decision to make.

[Lanny Ross:] That was a very difficult one, but I chose the singing. And uh that took us throughout all the countries of Europe, a very gratifying experience indeed.

[ER:] I think that's interesting, and that uh leads me to something that um I'd like to ask you about uh your new album of records called "Song Trip Around the World." What about that? (8:26)

[Lanny Ross:] Do you think I'm qualified to handle that now since we've talked about Europe and New Caledonia? [ER and Lanny Ross laugh]

[ER:] [ER laughing] Well I should think so um--

[Lanny Ross:] Well- well these uh these records, Mrs. Roosevelt, are two records, non-breakable records, published by the Adventure Record company, compile--containing twelve songs. Let me see those again the--uh England, France, Holland, Ireland, Norway, Russia, and then Switzerland, Italy, Egypt, China, Mexico, and of course, the good old United States.

[ER and Lanny Ross overlap]

[ER:] Why I think that's very interesting. I'm--I'd love to hear them--must be uh did--are they songs that uh you wrote or are they songs--

[Lanny Ross:] No, I wish I had. They're song--they're characteristic songs of these countries with English words, so that they--

[ER:] And, who set them to the English words?

[Lanny Ross:] Well they're a group of people. I--

[ER:] A group of people [Lanny Ross: Yes.] translated them and set them to the music?

[Lanny Ross:] No, they're contemporary words, they're not translations. They're songs about the Eiffel Tower, songs about China, the rickshaw. The things you would expect, as a traveler, to find in the countries you go to.

[ER:] Oh, I see. And are they really written for children?

[Lanny Ross:] I think that people who are adults who have travelled to those countries would like them very well, but of course children who are learning about them would be excited about them too. Now I tell you, I think that uh I am in a position to say something rather nice because everyone knows that you're identified with the United Nations. And wouldn't you like to have some of your friends have these records? (9:57)

[ER:] Indeed, I would. I think it would be wonderful to have them um for um a great many people. I'm afraid if- if I began to tell you how much I--how many I thought uh they'd be far too many [ER and Lanny Ross laugh]. But I think they'd be wonderful to have out there, and let them hear them. (10:17)

[Lanny Ross:] Well, let us talk about this then and see if we can't arrange for some of your friends to have these records.

[ER:] Well, I think that's a wonderful idea. Now, we have to let our sponsors come in again.

(Break from 10:28-10:41)

[ER:] I have an idea, Mr. Ross, thinking over your very generous uh offer um how-how many records do you think um they would give us suppose we had uh a contest of some kind?

[Lanny Ross:] Well, I think that it would be nice. I'm sure the people that make these records would like to contribute ten sets.

[ER:] Well, now I think it would be interesting. You know we very often have, as visitors out at the United Nations, a great many schoolchildren; they come in great numbers. And I always wonder what they get out of it because they wander round, they are briefed a little bit [Lanny Ross: Mhm.] But it's always um it's always one of those things you wonder about, because they come into committees, and they um listen, of course, with earphones, but they certainly can't understand what's going on in the committees, and so I've always wondered what it meant to them. And I think it would be fun to have a contest and ask the children, say in New York City Schools or in New York State uh Schools, uh those who've been to the United Nations uh to just write us letters [ER clears throat] and pick out the ten best and give them the records as a prize.

[Lanny Ross:] Well, that- that might include any child who's ever been to the United Nations. That would include anybody across the country, then who could write in, and the best letters, let's say, would you say a hundred words, so that it won't be too lengthy to read?

[ER:] Well, I should think it might be something like that um but I--we'd have to think it out and plan it a little more carefully [Lanny Ross: Mhm.] I think, but um, nevertheless, I-I think that's a very generous offer and I'm very grateful and we'll think out something that will be advantageous to the knowledge of the United Nations. (12:33)

[Lanny Ross:] Well, you'll find out two things. You'll find out how many children uh follow you--your broadcast and also how many have taken a great interest in the United Nations. And I'm sure if I were a little boy again, I would want to see the building just as I'd want to see the Capitol of the United States.

[ER:] Well, we have one little boy there who comes constantly with his father, who is a delegate from Venezuela, and he knows what happens in every committee and follows every committee with care, and he can tell me things that have happened two years ago when I don't think the child is more than twelve years old.

[Lanny Ross:] You better get him on your payroll as your secretary! [Lanny Ross and ER laugh]

[ER:] He's quite a remarkable child. Well, now I want to come back to you. Uh what are you doing now?

[Lanny Ross:] Well, as a-as a singer I am available for singing and do sing a great deal. I have a daily show which comes on shortly before yours does. And, I'm very proud of the fact that I've been invited down to Pennsylvania to open the new Harrisburg-Philadelphia turnpike. You know that's a great connecting link between Pittsburg and Philadelphia [ER: Oh that's very interesting.]. So uh I probably will watch the cutting of the ribbon and then I'll sing some songs. But of course we've talked about world songs, I don't know what to sing for a turnpike. Have you got any suggestions? [ER laughs]

[ER:] [ER laughs] I don't know what you sing for a turnpike! [Lanny Ross laughs] You'll have to--you'll have to sing--I think you'll have to sing something about--um uh that could-- takes us back to the days when we went West, those uh early days those songs [Lanny Ross: Mhm.] then that were written.

[Lanny Ross and ER overlap]

[Lanny Ross:] "The Surrey with the Fringe on Top," perhaps? [ER: That's--] Of course I doubt if a surrey will ever drive along the turnpike. I wonder if-- [ER: No I don't think so, but something about--] how-- how about a song like--

[ER:] How the country was opened up in those early days.

[Lanny Ross:] How about a song like “It’s a Long Road that has No Turning”?

[ER:] Yes, that’s a good song. But um there must be, I don’t know what they are but I’ve-I’ve heard Carl Sandburg singing some of those early songs and uh I think um you--they’re more in the way of ballads, of course-- (14:38)

[Lanny Ross:] Of—cowboy ballads, like, [singing] “Come along boys, and listen to my tale, I’ll tell you of my troubles on the Chisholm trail. Come a ti yi yippee yippee yea yippee yea, come a ti yi yippee yippee yea.”

[ER:] Well, I think that’-that’s [LR: Oh --] a good one.

[Lanny Ross:] That might have a flavor for the turnpike [Lanny Ross laughs].

[ER and Lanny Ross overlap]

[ER:] You might have--it might have a flavor for the turnpike. After all the turnpike is linking up the West [Lanny Ross: Yes.]. It’s going uh it’s going towards the West.

[Lanny Ross:] They’ll- they’ll- they’ll move a lot faster on it though than the old boys did [Lanny Ross laughs].

[ER:] [ER laughs] Yes, they certainly will! I always wonder whether these new turnpikes um, really save accidents or don’t.

[Lanny Ross:] Oh, I believe they do, and I think that’s one of the, one of the reasons our country is so great today. It’s magnificent transportation system.

[ER:] And you-you think they-they really add to the safety of-of the road? (15:27)

[Lanny Ross:] Yes, because the vision is-is not uh impaired by sudden turns, and it really is a mistake to have an accident on one of the big turnpikes.

[ER:] Well, Elliott’s looking at me as though he wanted to say a word, so we’ll stop for a minute. (Break from 15:43-15:59)

[ER:] Do you think that music, Mr. Ross, can play a part in bringing the world closer together?

[Lanny Ross:] That’s a big question. I do believe it can and it has been playing its part all these years. When you think of the early colonists of our country, they brought, they-they brought the folk song ballads of Ireland and Scotland and Wales to this country in the earliest parts, and then as immigration from other countries has occurred, our country has been richer for it. The great Italian immigration, and the middle-European immigration until finally America is reaching a maturity in music that it never had before. Don’t you think so? [unclear speech]

[ER:] Yes, I do think that, I do think we’re getting surer of our own taste and better able to enjoy music because we like it and not because somebody told us we ought to like it, which, at one time, I think uh we suffered from. But now I really think there is a great deal of taste for music in this country and one

international aspect that has always interested me is the fact that it's a language that everyone speaks regardless of whether they can speak in words or not. (17:21)

[Lanny Ross:] That's true, you can always go--if you're traveling and you feel lonesome for the reason that you don't understand the language of the country where you are, you can always go to a concert hall, and who knows, you might hear Wagner, you might hear Victor Herbert, you might hear Gretchaninov, I never can say that word, but at least you would be among friends. One thing though that I've always -- that uh came to my attention, was during the First World War when I was a little boy, the--uh it was unfashionable to play Wagner.

[ER and Lanny Ross overlap]

[ER:] Unfashionable to play Wagner?

[Lanny Ross:] Yes, a lot of people didn't want to play Wagner.

[ER:] Oh well, that just-- I remember that in-in World War I. I think that was one of the stupidest things that ever happened. I remember having people say that they wouldn't play Wagner because we were fighting a war with the Germans; that always seemed to me absolutely ridiculous.

[Lanny Ross:] Well, that has its counterpart in today's problems. I remember also they wouldn't have hamburger steak; they used to call it "liberty steak," you remember that? [ER and Lanny Ross laugh]

[ER:] [ER laughs] I remember that too! Of course, I think those things are perfectly silly.

[Lanny Ross:] They're fads at the time, but Wagner sailed through several wars, and he's still a magnificent composer. [ER: Oh yes, yes.] Course we--I think the Russians have contributed the most beautiful music. They may not have invented the airplane as they claim, or penicillin, or other things, but they certainly have invented Tchaikovsky and Rimsky Korsakov.

[ER:] Well, they've-they've all--and they are a very musical people. Now I remember one thing that interested me. You remember during World War II there were one or two really very serious um trips that went to uh Russia and some boys were interned in a port there for a very long time. And I saw them after they got back and they told me that the one thing they enjoyed through their long winter months of internment was going into a rough, cold hall but where the Russians gathered every night and sang and our boys off the ships came to and learned a great many Russian songs and that was their one point of contact because they didn't know the language. (19:36)

[Lanny Ross:] That is very interesting, and in Japan where I was shortly after the emancipation, you would've been surprised to see the Japanese girls who had been brought up in the classical tradition, the GIs hadn't been there more than three days when they were singing the "Cow Cow Boogie," [ER laughs] they were doing fine. They-they got our ways very quickly.

[ER:] Well, it's-it's one of the ways to educate uh and bring us together.

[Lanny Ross:] Well, speaking of bringing us together, you know that you are, in a sense, going to become a colleague of mine?

[ER:] What?

[Lanny Ross:] Yes you are, you're going to-I've heard it rumored and I hear it said that you're going to take part in the big NBC Christmas television show. [ER: That's--] And uh this may be news to you, but the nice thing about it is that my old choir school is, perhaps, going to be invited to assist you and sing Adeste Fidelis. You see I came from the Cathedral Choir School, where Martin Jones also went as a choir boy.

[ER:] Well this is very interesting to me and it's all news! [LR: Well--] But nevertheless [LR: It's--] I know that I'll enjoy what I hear [Lanny Ross laughs].

[Lanny Ross:] You see, it is just again a question of music bringing people closer together.

[ER:] Well, thank you so much, Mr. Ross, you're most kind to have been with us tonight. And sometime come and see us in Dutchess County, won't you?

[Lanny Ross:] Thank you very much.

[ER:] Alright, and now we must go back to the rest of our program.

(20:58)

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Transcription: Katie Woods

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