

Arthur Robinson Kirkham (1897–1981)

By Stephen R. Mark

By the mid-1950s, Art Kirkham was considered the dean of broadcasters in the Pacific Northwest. He was the first television announcer on KOIN, a Portland radio and television station; anchor of the popular *Newspaper of the Air* (radio) and *News Parade* (television); the play-by-play announcer for Oregon State University football; and a voice of Portland's Rose Parade. Kirkham was a member of the Portland Chamber of Commerce from 1941 until 1956 and a promoter of Oregon throughout his life. An ardent conservationist, he was a co-founder of Save the Myrtle Woods, a campaign to protect myrtle groves in Oregon.

Arthur Robinson Kirkham was born in Portland on February 1, 1897. He attended public schools and as a teenager traveled with his father, a pharmaceutical salesman. After high school, he was a business college student until he enlisted in the U.S. Army in May 1917. Although rejected for infantry duty, Kirkham served as an ambulance driver and stretcher bearer in four major World War I offensives in Belgium and northern France.

Kirkham had begun singing while in the army, and in the fall of 1919 he enrolled at Oregon Agricultural College (now Oregon State University) to study music. He was part of several musical productions and was a member of a popular quartet on campus. He met Lorena Marr at OAC, and the couple married in April 1922; they would have three children. Kirkham landed a job as a singer at KGW, a Portland radio station, and received a degree in music in 1923. He returned to Corvallis as an announcer when KOAC went on the air in 1925. His success there opened doors for his career in 1928 at a new Portland station with the call letters KOIN. Within a year, Kirkham was named senior announcer at KOIN.

Over the next three decades, Kirkham became the most recognizable broadcast voice in Oregon. In 1932, he created *This and That*, an informal review of philosophy, common experience, and travel, with content supplied by listeners. While continuing to work as an announcer, he was made the station's director of public relations in 1935 and its vice president in 1942. Along the way, he achieved notoriety as a college football sportscaster on the CBS radio network of affiliates. He also narrated a film, *The New Oregon Trail* (1941), to promote Oregon tourism. *Glimpses of the State Parks in Oregon* was released in 1949, with Kirkham supplying the voiceover and Sam Boardman, Oregon's first superintendent of State Parks, providing the introduction. KOIN debuted as Portland's first VHF television station on October 15, 1953, with Kirkham as its first announcer.

Kirkham had a deep interest in conservation and actively promoted the expansion of state parks, as part of a small group of supporters that Boardman periodically roused into action. One of Boardman's hopes was to save the myrtle groves in Coos, Curry, and Douglas Counties. The Oregon State Highway Commission had refused to provide funds for the groves, so Kirkham, Thornton Munger of the U.S. Forest Service, and *Oregon Journal* associate editor Marshall Dana decided to borrow a page from Save-the-Redwoods League in California. In 1946, they set up Save the Myrtle Woods, Inc., with sponsors in more than a third of Oregon's counties. Their intention was to buy the healthiest myrtle groves in the state and donate them as parks. By 1958, they had orchestrated the purchase of eighteen groves and had placed them under the management of county, state, and federal agencies and one timber company.

Soon after Kirkham retired from KOIN in the spring of 1962, he signed on to manage the Oregon exhibit at Century 21 Exhibition, the world's fair in Seattle. He continued as host of programs, such as *Exploring Scenic Oregon* at KOIN, until the mid-1970s. Art Kirkham died in June 1981.

Sources

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