The YEAR WAS 1938 and Europe was in turmoil. Hitler had taken Austria, and Great Britain’s Chamberlain was busy trying to appease him. The clouds of war gathered ominously. Meanwhile, in the United States, on the third floor of the Grant Building in Pittsburgh, the program department of radio station KDKA was meeting with the sales department.

“What program ideas do you guys have that we can sell?”

“How about a program with poetry and music — something to take people’s minds away from the discouraging headlines of war?”

“Did you say poetry?”

“Yes, I said poetry — something completely different from the stuff they’re listening to every day.”

“What advertiser’s going to pay for a poetry program? Not a chance.”

I was at that meeting, and I saw the naysayers overruled. The program manager was determined to try something new. “Let’s put it on and see if you guys can sell it.”

William G. Beal, a 1934 graduate of the former Carnegie Institute of Technology’s drama school, joined KDKA radio as an actor before becoming an announcer and producer. He eventually served as the station’s continuity editor. With the advent of television in 1949, he initiated “Pitt Parade,” Pittsburgh’s first TV news program. In 1952, he established his own motion picture company, from which he retired in 1992. He is also a co-author of When Radio Was Young: Questions and Answers about Early Pittsburgh Radio (Wilkinsburg Commission, 1995).
Thus was born the “The Dream Weaver,” the creation of a young and gifted Pittsburgh writer — a writer at KDKA — whose name was Marjorie Thoma. She had faith, persistence and an Irish glint in her eye. Plus, she seemed to have an endless supply of lyrical poetry in her soul.

It was hard to believe. Almost overnight, the listeners’ responses were felt. Letters started pouring in. The station received scores of requests for copies of the poems.

This was the kind of reaction time salesmen at radio stations dreamt about. Here was proof of a tremendous listening audience — the kind that sponsors dreamt about. In fact, the program had such power and appeal that it began a daily morning program slot under the advertising banner of the Braun Baking Company. It ran Monday through Friday, week after week, month after month, year after year, through the late 1940s.

Anyone who listened to KDKA from 1938 through the tension-filled years of World War II is likely to remember “The Dream Weaver.” The music was played by Bernie Armstrong, the versatile young organist who matched the mood of the music to the theme of each poem. His music provided the background for the resonant voice of Paul Shannon, who read the poems.

The program struck a nerve. It appealed to listeners searching for inspiration, beauty, love, and understanding. The poems spoke of what people cared about, the values of hearth and home, the everyday ups and downs.

Each program opened with this signature verse:

“He who knows your dreams knows you better than your closest friend.

He who reads your unhampered mind, your questing heart, your quickening pulse,

For He is your companion on this mystic journey through the unknown borderlands of life;

He who knows your dreams in all their hidden meaning, holds you close;

He reads the longings in your heart, and He is with you now... as always...”

Marjorie Thoma, now Mrs. Joseph Michaux, still lives in Pittsburgh’s East End and still writes poetry — nowadays often about wild birds and gardening. Her husband, a retired executive, shares her love of nature and can be found with trowel in hand working with her in their tulip-filled yard. Marjorie Michaux still conjures up dreams and wonders how she achieved so much as a professional writer while raising a family of 15 children.

How could one person write poems day after day to fill the airwaves with her thoughts and hopes and dreams? She tells the story of how she developed her treasury of verse:

When we started the program, I had selected poems which I particularly liked and wanted to share with the listeners. But before they could be broadcast, it would be necessary to obtain the permission of the publishers. That meant writing to many publishing houses for copyright clearances. They, in turn, had to contact the poets on copyright lawyers.

Well, the delays and red tape were so frustrating that I decided on an alternate plan of action.
I decided to use my own poems, verses I had composed through the years and which I felt would be well-received. I’m happy to say that the listener response was enthusiastic. From that moment on, I wrote all the poetry used on “The Dream Weaver.”

Here is one of her favorites which also was among the most requested:

**I Love You**
Oh, I love you so very much today!
I love you most what you took away,
A weight of sorrow that lay against my heart,
I love you because your eyes met mine and then,
You reached out and placed a white and gentle hand
On the scar where the cold world left its mark.

Oh, I love you so very much today!
I love you because, like sweet-laden winds of May
You stepped through the winter of my life,
Through the wet weeds and bracken,
You came, light as milk-weeds blowing
Across the frozen fields, into the shadow dark.

Not for the sun that you brought today,
But for the shadows you took away:
That is why I love you so much, dear heart.

Michaux was skillful in capturing moods and happy moments, as illustrated in this brief glimpse of life:

**The First Step**
He couldn’t understand their apparent surprise —
That jubilant look in Daddy’s eyes,
Or the radiant smile that Mother wore!
Grown-ups were always so queer before,
But today they were worse; they kept crying: “My darling! My pet!”
All because he had set forth one small wobbly foot,
And gingerly taken his first tentative step!

Looking back, Michaux admits that some of her poems were “corny,” and she doesn’t deny that they are sentimental. But she reminds us that it was a different time — a time of innocence. Most of us were reluctant to express our feelings. Still, a person could be moved and touched by words and music and the compelling power of the human voice. After Pearl Harbor, the program became the favorite of mothers whose sons had enlisted, wives whose husbands were in the service, and children whose fathers were fighting overseas.

“I wrote for the old lady over the hill,” Michaux believes.

“Radio’s secret was its quality of person-to-person communication. My Irish mother and my Bavarian father must have endowed me with a gene that translated everyday life into poetry. I drew on every aspect of experience — from the unwinding spool of everydayness: holidays, family highlights, our deepest thoughts, our sincerest prayers, the seasons.”

Bernie Armstrong, above, was KDKA’s popular organist and music director who created a melodic backdrop for the show’s poetry. Paul Shannon was the resonant-voiced announcer.
Indian Summer
Twilight and Indian Summer, these are life’s tender afterglows,
The compensation nature gives for the loss of youth and fire;
For “Summer” on the wane, it seems, leaves a comfort as she goes,
A mellow resignation that was once a flaming, fierce desire.
For when I was young and eager, full of dreams and plans,
And scornful of the dreary side of life;
I chased my rainbow tints across the face of many lands,
And laughed in full exultance at those who lived with strife;
I could not look on suffering faces nor bear their lonely eyes,
For filled with sunlight were my days; clear and cloudless were my skies.

But the book is drawing to a close, I wouldn’t have dreamed of years ago,
Tapering off the fires and growing milder towards the end,
The Indian Summer of my life with its gentle afterglow,
Seems laden with a greater promise; that I go forth to meet a friend.

After her years at KDKA, where she created many radio dramas, Michaux went on to a full career as an accredited public relations practitioner and worked as a public relations director for major Pittsburgh advertising agencies. She was elected president of American Women in Radio and Television and the Women’s Press Club of Pittsburgh. She also was an instructor in Radio and Television writing at Carnegie Institute of Technology (now Carnegie Mellon University).

In 1990, she donated her writing talents for the publication of Historic Wilkinsburg — 1887-1987, for which she was named Citizen of the Year by the Wilkinsburg Chamber of Commerce. Through the years she authored articles for newspapers and magazines, and her poems are included in the 1993 Dorrance Anthology of Contemporary American and British Poets.

Michaux is now in her 70s, living gracefully and still writing poetry. An example is her recent Christmas poem, which though it has a modern style, is still imbued with heart-felt imagery:

The Eternal Search
today they storm the changing skies,
the fathomless seas,
searching endlessly for answers
that elude them —
their laser beams throw diagrams
on their computer screens
that only lead to deeper mysteries
still they probe the whirling suns and stars
for clues to guide them.

not 2,000 years ago, the Wise Men,
seeking answers,
followed a star to Bethlehem
and knelt in wonder
before a small child
in a manger
and there, before the Greatest Mystery of all,
found happiness and peace
and arose rejoicing
for they had touched the source of life
in which lay gleaming like a jewel —
their answer.

Michaux remembers those “Dream Weaver” days with fondness, and still corresponds with friends who have followed her work through the years.

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The Dream Weaver Lady
Page 148-152 All photographs courtesy of the author

Fort Granville & the French Letter
Page 154-55 Historical Society of Pennsylvania, Philadelphia

Edward Abbey’s Appalachian Roots
Page 160-61 By John Trotter, Sacramento, Calif.

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Two hundred historical and cultural artifacts and documents are showcased in this poignant exhibit, produced by the Strong Museum, Rochester, New York, opening at the Senator John Heinz Pittsburgh Regional History Center January 18, 1997.

America’s attitudes toward death dramatically contrasted in two time periods — 1850 to 1920 and 1920 to 1993 — in four major areas:

- **Expectations, Experiences, Explanations**
  Contrasts life expectancy, mortality, and causes of death during the 19th and 20th centuries.

- **Coping with Loss**
  Explores this subject through videotaped interviews with persons from various ethnic groups.

- **The Emotions of Grief**
  Examines many aspects of grief — shock, denial, anger, guilt, sorrow, and longing through first-person quotes and photographs.

- **Resource Center**
  Provides a quiet space in which visitors may reflect and share their feelings and memories. Videos, literature, and books available for perusal.

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