

Dorothy Snell Fuldheim (1893-1989)

Journalist and Broadcasting Pioneer



Dorothy Fuldheim circa 1930 and 1977

Cleveland Public Library/Photograph Collection

Prominently situated outside the entrance to the WEWS studios at the corner of Euclid Avenue and East 30th Streets is Ohio Historical Marker #44-18, which recognizes iconic journalist Dorothy Fuldheim, considered to be one of the most trusted voices in Cleveland television for 37 years.

By the time of her retirement in 1984 at the age of 91, she had been a nightly presence on the television screen—and before that a respected radio commentator—for an unbroken span of 37 years. As WEWS-TV Channel 5's resident news analyst (and top guest interviewer on the Cleveland station's noontime news program), she was known for her broadcasting skills and nightly opinionated and informative commentary. During her distinguished career, she conducted over 15,000 interviews—including Adolf Hitler, Benito Mussolini, the Duke of Windsor, Albert Einstein, Helen Keller, and every U.S. president since Franklin D. Roosevelt.

Born Dorothy Violet Snell in Passaic, N.J., to parents Herman and Bertha (Schnell), who were of German and Russian ancestry, she grew up in Milwaukee, Wisconsin. Her childhood was one of extreme poverty. She walked to school with holes in her shoes and remembered wearing dresses her mother made out of old curtains. Her childhood was dominated by cold and hunger – and by books. Fuldheim found that she possessed an overwhelming desire to learn and use the power of language. Her siblings nicknamed her “dictionary-swallower.”

Though money was tight, she was able to go to college. She studied to be a teacher, attending Milwaukee Normal College, where she graduated in 1912 with an English degree. She taught elementary school for three years.

After careers as a country school teacher; a little-theater actress whose finest hour came as Juliet in an outdoor production in Milwaukee; a book reviewer; an immensely successful lecturer and a radio commentator, at the age of 54, she got her first job in television.

Following her marriage to Milton H. Fuldheim, she moved to Cleveland in the 1920s and pursued a career in lecturing. She also gained experience in radio, including a local historical biographical series on **WTAM** and a weekly editorial over the ABC network.

Ms. Fuldheim began her career in broadcasting in 1944 as a news commentator for WJW radio in Cleveland. In 1947 WEWS, Scripps-Howard Broadcasting Company’s first TV property and the first television station between Chicago and New York, was about to hit the airwaves. Based on her local recognition, WEWS hired her to be their nightly newscaster. This assignment made her the television’s first female news anchor and, possibly, TV’s first news commentator, male or female.

In addition to anchoring the evening news, part of her TV job also included hosting one of the first live variety series, *The One O’Clock Club*, with Bill Gordon. The show reportedly made Dorothy a Cleveland legend, and in 1964 when national competitors including Merv Griffin’s show took its place, WEWS couldn’t retire her. At the age of seventy-one she began doing two-a-day editorial features.

Dorothy Fuldheim was also renowned for her writing skills and critically acclaimed novels which include: *Where Were the Arabs?; I Laughed, I Loved, I Cried; A Thousand Friends and Three and A Half Husbands*. Her commentaries are preserved in Kent State University’s Special Collections.

Over the years, she earned numerous awards from organizations that included JNF (Jewish National Fund), Hadassah, Histadrut, and the Anti-Defamation League. She also won awards from the United Press International for Editorial Excellence, the Overseas Press Club, Woman of the Decade, and the Israeli Freedom Award.

In 1983, just before her ninetieth birthday, Dorothy Fuldheim made national news when she signed a three-year contract with Channel 5. Along with carrying her into her ninety-third year, the renewed contract also included a substantial raise in salary.

She did the final interview of her career with then-president Ronald Reagan on the day she suffered a major stroke in 1984. Cleveland's "grand lady" of television, who earned her international acclaim as a newscaster and commentator, died on November 3, 1989, at the age of 96. She was buried in the Bet Olam Cemetery in Beachwood.

Ms. Fuldheim was married and widowed twice. Her first husband, attorney Milton H. Fuldheim, died in 1952. She later married businessman William Ulmer, who died in 1969. Ms. Fuldheim's daughter from her first marriage, Dorothy Fuldheim-Urman, who had been an assistant professor of Russian literature at Case Western Reserve University, died in 1980. Ms. Fuldheim was survived by a granddaughter, Halla Urman.

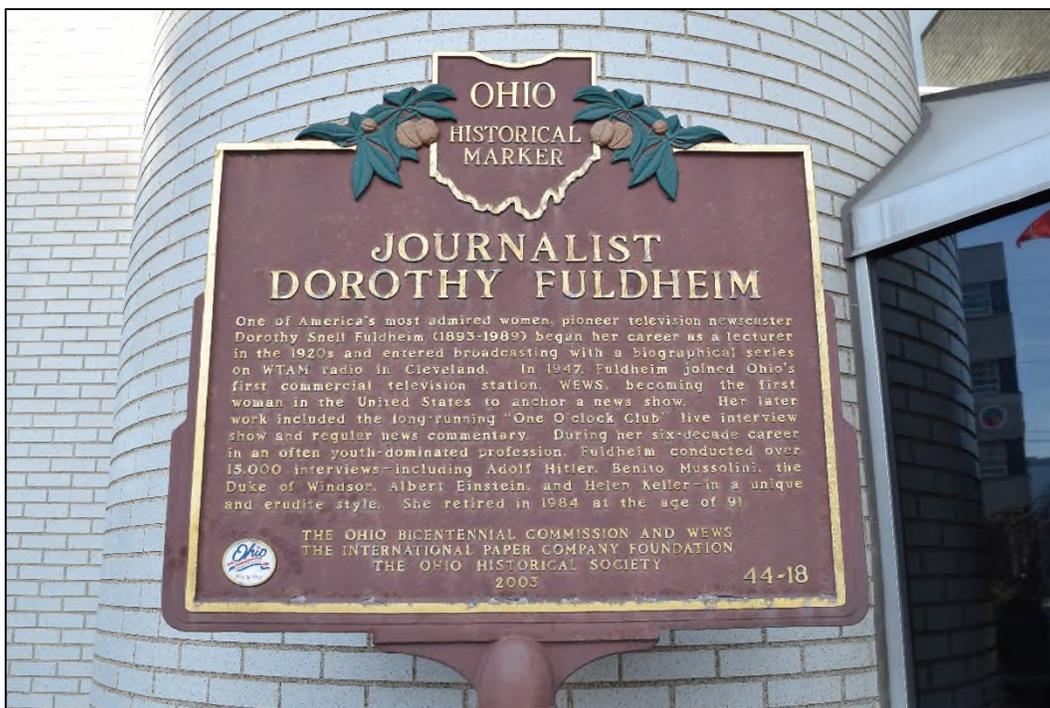


Photo Credit: Gail Greenberg

More on Dorothy Fuldheim

Anderson, Greta. "Dorothy Fuldheim (1893-1989): Cleveland's Media Doyenne." *More than Petticoats: Remarkable Ohio Women*. Globe Pequot Press, 2005, pp. 131-140.

Finucane, Margaret O. "Dorothy Fuldheim: A Legend in Local News." edited by Beadle, Mary E., and Michael D. Murray. *Indelible Images: Women of Local Television*. Iowa State University Press, 2001, pp. 51-60.

"Fuldheim, Dorothy." Encyclopedia of Cleveland History.
<https://case.edu/ech/articles/f/fuldheim-dorothy>

- Fuldheim, Dorothy. *A Thousand Friends*. Doubleday, 1974.
- Fuldheim, Dorothy. *I Laughed, I Cried, I Loved; a News Analyst's Love Affair with the World*. World Pub. Co., 1966.
- Kent State University Press. Dorothy Fuldheim Papers 1968-1990.
<https://www.library.kent.edu/special-collections-and-archives/dorothy-fuldheim-papers>
- Mote, Patricia M. *Dorothy Fuldheim: the First First Lady of Television News*. Quixote Publications, 1997.
- O'Dell, Cary. "Dorothy Fuldheim". *Women Pioneers in Television: Biographies of Fifteen Industry Leaders*. McFarland, 1997, pp. 105-118.
- Ohio Women's Hall of Fame. "Dorothy Fuldheim."
<https://resources.ohiohistory.org/womenshof/>
- "1983 Special Citation for Distinguished Service to the Arts" *Cleveland Arts Prize Archives*.
http://clevelandartsprize.org/awardees/dorothy_fuldheim.html
- "Salute to Our Dorothy." *Cleveland Jewish News*, March 1, 1974.
- "Histadrut Campaign Dinner Salutes Dorothy Fuldheim; Memorializes Her Daughter." *Cleveland Jewish News*, November 12, 1982.
- "ADL to Pay Tribute to TV's Fuldheim." *Cleveland Jewish News*, June 8, 1984.
- Wain, Norman. "Her Life Enriched Our Lives; Her Death Has Saddened Us." *Cleveland Jewish News*, November 10, 1989.
- "Dorothy Fuldheim Dies, 96; TV Newscaster, Analyst." *Cleveland Jewish News*, November 10, 1989.
- WEWS. "30 minute special from 1976 celebrating Dorothy Fuldheim's 83rd birthday part 1". <https://youtu.be/90TEXNhMh9A>
- WEWS. "30 minute special from 1976 celebrating Dorothy Fuldheim's 83rd birthday part 2". https://youtu.be/Yjf4i_PQ7-4
- Gail Greenberg 12/23/2020
www.ClevelandJewishHistory.net