

EWAVES

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VOLUME 6 NUMBER 9



Bobby MELTON

memories of a
small-town
radio guy

INSIDE:

LEGACY STATION **WDIA**
CELEBRATES 70 YEARS
ON THE AIR

A RADIO COMPANY'S
FIRST DAY IN
TELEVISION



OFF MIC

BY DOUGLAS COMBS, PRESIDENT



Last month I lost my best friend, Dennis Billingsley (WKAY, WCDS, WGGC). Our friendship began with my first job in radio and had survived 47 years. While reflecting before giving a eulogy at his celebration of life service, I thought about a friendship that most likely would not have happened without radio.

Not all benefits of working in radio are on a paycheck stub. You can build a nice music library with the albums and compact discs. Some people have quilts made from their promotional t-shirts. And at one time or another, we all have had a free meal while doing a remote. I believe that the best benefit of all is the people we meet and share the air bands with along the way.

My world widened and a new chapter opened when I attended my first meeting of the group that would become the Tennessee Radio Hall of Fame. Suddenly the room was filled with voices that had kept me company over the years. Many I knew, some I didn't and now, all are now friends. Not every city or area has an organized effort to keep those friendships or acquaintances connected. Chattanooga is a unique city that works to keep those connections constant. Each December for many years, a homecoming is celebrated for radio. Reunions are common for stations, but in Chattanooga, this event is for all radio in the area. The adopted working name is 'VRW' (Veterans of Radio Wars).

Most days the attendees are/were fierce competitors. On a day every December, for a few hours, they gather, break bread, swap stories and celebrate radio in Chattanooga as friends. For the past several years, I have had the great fortune to be in attendance. David Carroll and Garry Mac are the driving force behind this lovefest. I know that several attendees now live out of state, but they plan road trips around the yearly gathering.

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Memories of a Small-Town Radio Guy

BY BOBBY MELTON

Although I have many stories from my 45 plus years of radio broadcasting in my hometown one of the most memorable experiences involved a situation with my family almost four decades ago.

I was working as News Director of WFWL in Camden on the morning of Wednesday November 7, 1979 preparing our daily noontime local news report. The newscast would consist of the typical small-town items such as a City Council report, the upcoming Veterans Day Program at the high school; a Senior Citizens Center Pot Luck Supper; the local weather report; farm news from the network and sports scores. Also at the time we were doing a daily phone report of the admissions and discharges from the local hospital that was given by their switchboard operator, Andrea Madden who is also my sister.

At approximately 11 a.m. the station secretary, Leisha Massengill came to my work desk and told me that I had a phone call. It was from one of the neighbors of the community of which I grew up in and fellow Church member, Harold Atchison. He asked me if I knew where my parents, Horace and Alva Melton might be. I told him I did not.

Harold went on to tell me that my brother-in-law, Walt Madden (Andrea's husband and my parents son-in-law) had been cutting a tree at the home of Hershel and Faye Waters (also neighbors) when the tree fell the wrong way and landed on his left leg. Harold told me that an ambulance had already been summoned and also that Andrea would be riding with the EMT's to the Waters residence. Faye had called her at the hospital switchboard to inform her of the news about Walt and she was able to board with the Ambulance Personnel before they had left their station which was headquartered in the hospital basement.

I also learned that Walt threw the chainsaw aside as the tree was falling towards him and, at some point after being pinned, he asked Faye to give it back to him. She did

that and somehow Walt was able to cut the tree off his leg to relieve some pressure but he was still in great pain and agony.

During my phone conversation with Harold I thought that perhaps my parents might be outside their home doing yard work as it was a beautiful fall day. Harold told me that he'd already stopped by their house, their car was gone and no one answered the door.



Bobby "Flash" Melton

After I hung up with Harold I tried a couple of times to call my parents myself but got no answer. I also thought that they might be visiting my aunts but calls to both of them revealed that they were not there or hadn't stopped by their homes at any time that morning.

Eventually I thought of only one way of getting a message to my parents and that was to make a live "on-air" announcement. This was after all during a time when we did not have mobile phones; text messages; e-mail; and other instant communications methods like we do today.

The morning DJ personality at WFWL at the time was Terry Hudson. He started at the station while still in high school and had been a part of the staff for almost 10 years. Terry remains a wonderful friend, is semi-retired and now resides in Murfreesboro.

After Terry gave me permission to enter the Control Room I told him about Walt and explained that I needed to "break-in" on his program and make an announcement to try and locate my parents. Terry told me to do what I had to do and after the record that was playing on the turntable ended I "opened the mike." Without

WFWL
1220 AM



Bobby Flash Melton (@bmelton168) | Twitter
Had a Good Crew covering @CamdenLionsVoll last night during the Regional Tourney Games. TY @steelesports Josh Simmons & @duffey_suzanna Spencer.

revealing any specific details of why I needed them I calmly made an announcement asking that if my parents were listening they needed to call me or if anyone knew where they were to phone me at the station.

Within ten minutes after making the announcement mom and dad walked into the lobby of the radio station and I told them about Walt's accident. My dad was retired at this time and my mom a devoted housewife. They had decided on this Wednesday morning to take a leisurely drive on some of Benton County's country roads and enjoy the beautiful autumn day. They had heard me on their car radio interrupt Terry's morning show and immediately made their way back into town and to the WFWL Studios. They knew some sort of urgent matter had happened for me to "call them out" on the airwaves of 1220 radio.

Mom and dad left our studios and immediately went to the hospital to check on Walt. Later they went to the Jackson Hospital as he was transferred there for surgery.

A few days later as I was reflecting back with my parents on how I got word to them about Walt's accident my mother shared this interesting tidbit. She had turned the car radio on only about five minutes before they heard my announcement. It was dad's custom not to have the radio on when he was driving. He was of the belief that if you were a passenger in his car you would pay attention to him and there would be no distractions! It goes without saying that, on the morning of November 7, 1979, I'm glad he was tuned in to WFWL 1220 AM in Camden.

Walt was released from the Jackson Hospital several days after his surgery and came home to begin his long road to recovery. Although he was limited in his capabilities Walt, Andrea and their daughter Lori who was a Senior in high school and

"It goes without saying that, on the morning of November 7, 1979, I'm glad he was tuned in to WFWL 1220 AM in Camden."

many other family members gathered at mom and dad's on Thursday, November 22, 1979 to Celebrate Thanksgiving. Just before the serving of the family meal we all formed a giant circle, joined hands and gave thanks to the Heavenly Father for his many blessings and asked for continued strength and healing for Walt. Thanksgiving has always been a special occasion for the Meltons and Maddens but having Walt with us just a couple of weeks after his accident made this Thanksgiving the best one ever.

Throughout my broadcasting career I've been honored and privileged to interview celebrities from all walks of life including politicians, actors, musicians and athletes. They're all wonderful and special memories to a small-town radio guy and I'm thankful for all of them.

However, the memory that I most fondly recall happened on that November day nearly 40 years ago when I used the power of local radio to convey an "SOS" message to my parents.



A RADIO COMPANY'S FIRST DAY IN TELEVISION

August 20, 1969, was the day WKPT-TV officially signed on the air in a most inauspicious way. WKPT AM had debuted in 1940 joined by WKPT-FM in 1948. Unable to get a VHF TV channel allocation, the company finally settled for a UHF channel after Congress passed the all channel television act in 1962 requiring all TV's to finally have UHF tuners. Only two members of the WKPT staff had any experience in TV. The GM had dealt with instructional TV while in the Army in the early 1950's. I had worked part-time for two years at the ABC affiliate in Knoxville while attending U.T. I was the new station's operations manager.

The TV tower and transmitter atop Holston Mountain had been on the air testing for a few days; however, the TV studio – 25 straight line miles and a 90 minute drive away in downtown Kingsport – was far from being ready for sign-on, and the studio-to-transmitter microwave link was yet to be constructed. Meanwhile ABC's fall programming rollout was near, and there was pressure to get ABC programming on the air ASAP so that individual viewers and cable systems could become accustomed to UHF-TV. WKPT-TV was the first UHF station in Northeast Tennessee/Southwest Virginia.

Another hold-up was the backorder of the station's aural modulation monitor. Having this piece of equipment was an FCC requirement in those days. Special Temporary Authorization had been requested from the FCC to go on the air without such a monitor, and finally in mid-afternoon on August 20th a Western Union delivery man arrived in uniform at the station with a telegram granting that authority. As the station's first operations manager I pleaded with the GM to get programming on the air that very night, and after little resistance he gave in. ABC programming was to be received and rebroadcast at the WKPT-TV transmitter over the air from the Knoxville ABC affiliate, WTVK, over a hundred miles away. The only way to get local video on the air was from a used black and white vidicon camera at the transmitter, which had been in use during equipment testing to telecast a test pattern and a station identification slide.

Kingsport's local Chevy dealer wanted to be the first commercial sponsor on the station, and slides had already been shot for a commercial. Everything local that aired that night

and for several nights thereafter came from that black and white camera and a Kodak Carousel slide projector with accompanying audio from my personal Wollensack tape recorder. Once the decision to go on that night was made, I recorded all of the local audio for the night on a reel-to-reel tape in the WKPT radio production room on a vintage Magnecorder tape machine fed by a 1940's RCA board and a Western Electric cardioid microphone, grabbed the slides, picked up my Wollensack and a sandwich at home, and headed for the mountain.

Finally, WKPT-TV was really on the air! The national anthem was accompanied by a slide of the U.S. flag. Then came the sign-on accompanied by a station ID slide. We joined ABC for the evening news via WTVK. The news ended at 7:00, but network prime time programming did not begin until 7:30. From 7 to 7:30 viewers were treated to instrumental easy listening music – again from the trusty Wollensack tape recorder – accompanied by a station ID slide. ABC prime shows via WTVK and local station breaks originating from slides in black and white and audio tape progressed through the evening. From 11 to 11:30, when ABC's late night Joey Bishop show was to begin, viewers got more recorded background music. Sign-off came at 1:00 AM along with the national anthem and that slide of the flag.

It was quite an evening with lots of calls coming into the station's office and soon to be studio in Kingsport including one from a viewer in Oak Ridge over a hundred miles away! News of all of this was relayed to the mountain via two-way radio as there was no telephone service there until many years later.

That's the way WKPT-TV operated for several more days until the studio and STL link were completed. Locally those first few days were like radio on TV. We had fun! For me it was a very exciting time, and one I will never forget as WKPT-TV is now in its 50th year of service to the Tri-Cities Tennessee/Virginia market.

George DeVault began his broadcast career at WKPT-AM/FM in Kingsport in 1961 at age 15. He became a full-time employee there in 1968 following graduation from U.T. Knoxville and retired from the company in 2017 having served Holston Valley Broadcasting as its President during his last 34 years there. He remains part-owner and a consultant to the company, which now owns several additional AM and FM radio stations and Class A TV stations.



WDIA CELEBRATES 70 YEARS ON THE AIR

2013 Legendary Station WDIA, the first radio station in the United States programmed by and for African Americans was one of only six stations broadcasting in Memphis, Tennessee when it hit the airwaves in 1947. On November 17, the station turns 70!

Its owners, John Pepper and Dick Ferguson, established the station and located it at 2074 Union Avenue. Initially programmed to appeal to the white demographic with classical, country-western, and various other musical genres, WDIA failed to distinguish itself, and in a last attempt to stave off failure, began to play Blues records. It featured shows by Beale Street legends such as Hall of Famer Legacy Inductee Nat D. Williams, 2013 Radio Hall of Famer Rufus Thomas, B.B. King, and Bobby "Blue" Bland. King would later attribute his success as a musician to the recognition he received from his early career airtime on WDIA. In 1949, the station was #two in Memphis in terms of audience. It then switched permanently to all-black programming, and quickly moved into first place.

Broadcasting Blues, Gospel, and various talk programs, WDIA became known as a "direct appeal" to advertisers who wished to reach the African American demographic. Acquiring the right to broadcast at a higher wattage, the station moved to 1070 kHz and boosted their signal from 250 watts to 50,000 watts and was now capable of reaching as far north as Missouri and as far south as the Gulf Coast. That range included about 10% of the black population of the United States which in turn garnered substantial advertising revenues. Influencing every black radio station to follow, WDIA assigned itself the moniker "the Mother Station of Negroes." It earned the nickname "the Goodwill Station" as well because it broadcast

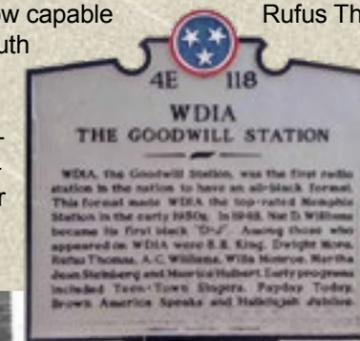
public service bulletins announcing employment opportunities, missing children, social service agency information, and the like at the behest of its listening audience.

Though the on-air talent was black, as were the artists whose music they played, ownership remained white. The office staff was racially integrated by 1950 which was rare in Memphis or any Southern city at that time but the station did not see its first black manager until 1972. Ownership of the station first changed hands in 1957. After a series of local owners, it was bought by media giant Clear Channel Communication in 1997. Throughout this period, it continued to offer content for African Americans by African Americans.

WDIA moved its home to Radio Center, the former home of WMPS, in 1985, then to a suburban office park in 2004. Nat D. Williams' show ended in 1972 following a stroke.

Rufus Thomas maintained his program until his passing in 2001. Today, WDIA's major playlist offers very little in the way of the Beale Street Blues and Gospel that established the station, but spans the 1960s music to the present day, with significant air time devoted to the classic Soul sounds of the 1970s, and an occasional offering from its early on-air contributors B.B. King and Bobby "Blue" Bland.

Sources: www.mywdia.com; John Hopkins, Radio Center: A Landmark of American Music (Memphis: Hopkins-Oates & Associates, 2008); Louis Cantor, Wheelin' On Beale: How WDIA-Memphis Became the Nation's First All-Black Radio Station and Created the Sound that Changed America (New York: Pharos Books, 1992).



THANKSGIVING ON THE RADIO

BY GENMA STRINGER HOLMES



Tennesseans listening to the radio throughout the holidays is a tradition that members of the Hall of Fame hope never fades. Whether your station's format is Talk, Sports, Rock, Country, Gospel, Christian, Latin; here is a list of Thanksgiving songs that gives thanks, shows gratitude, will make you laugh and serves holiday favorites over the airwaves.

- A Charlie Brown Thanksgiving, George Winston
- Do the Mash Potatoes, James Brown
- Turkey Chase Remastered, Bob Dylan
- Sweet Potatoe Pie, Ray Charles & James Taylor
- Thank God I'm a Country Boy, John Denver
- Home, Johnnyswim
- Thanking the God Lord, Merle Haggard
- I have Plenty to be Thankful For, Bing Cosby
- Coat of Many Colors, Dolly Parton
- Blessed, Martina McBride
- Autumn in New York, Billie Holiday
- What a Wonderful World, Louis Armstrong
- Harvest Time, Luke Bryan
- Alice's Restaurant, Arlo Guthrie
- The Thanksgiving Song, Adam Sandler
- The Thanksgiving Prayer, Johnny Cash

UPCOMING MEETINGS

BOARD OF DIRECTORS MEETINGS

15 Dec 2018 11:00 AM • Location TBD

IN OUR DECEMBER ISSUE

Hall of Fame Updates

Christmas Time in Tennessee



SPECIAL THANKS

[klworks](#), graphic design

Ms. Dig Photography, cover photo

Got articles, news, tips, comments, questions, announcements or suggestions? Email us at TennRHof@gmail.com.

Please send all suggestions before December 10th for the January 2019 Issue.

Any story ideas or great content featuring Tennessee radio history, any member in the news, and Hall of Famers are welcome additions to our newly formatted newsletter.

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