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GROPING IN THE DARK: AN EARLY HISTORY OF WHAS RADIO

By

William A. Cummings
B.A. University of Louisville, 2007

A Thesis
Submitted to the Faculty of the
College of Arts and Sciences of the University of Louisville
in Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements
for the Degree of

Master of Arts

Department of History
University of Louisville
Louisville, Kentucky

May 2012

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A Thesis Approved on

April 5, 2012

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DEDICATION

This thesis is dedicated to the memory of my grandfather,
Horace Nobles. I miss you every day.

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

I would like to thank my thesis director, Dr. Thomas Mackey for acknowledging I needed direction and guidance before I realized it myself. I would also like to thank my other committee members, Dr. Christine Ehrick and Dr. Kyle Barnett for their enthusiasm, comments, and constructive criticism over these last few months. This project owes a great deal to Dr. Terry Birdwhistell of the University of Kentucky, whose research surfaces throughout. Dr. Birdwhistell was kind enough to lend his time to speak with me and to assist me in accessing a great deal of research material. Finally, I would like to thank my friends and family who seemed to take my anxiety over the past three years in stride and more often than not had more faith in my abilities than I did. Your patience and support have meant the world to me.

ABSTRACT

GROPING IN THE DARK: AN EARLY HISTORY OF WHAS RADIO

William A. Cummings

May 12, 2012

As the historiography on radio broadcasting continues to grow and forces examination from the macro-level to the micro-level, station histories are becoming increasingly important. The story of WHAS highlights the evolution of a nationally-celebrated, innovative radio station dedicated to the service of its community. However, this thesis argues that WHAS radio's arrival as a viable commercial business distorted the initial trajectories its forefathers intended for the medium thereby diluting its nobler aspects. A technological tool with the unprecedented power and influence -- to enlighten and enhance the daily lives of millions through education, the high art of classical music and opera, exposure to politics, and instant news updates, all filtered through a sense of duty to its listeners -- saw its grand ambitions watered down by the allure of increased profits sacrificing originality and imagination for accessible, light-entertainment programming generated from a handful of single sources.

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INTRODUCTION

At 7:30 P.M., on July 18, 1922, “This is WHAS, the radio-telephone broadcasting station of the *Courier-Journal* and *The Louisville Times* in Louisville, Kentucky” ripped through the hot, humid Ohio Valley air establishing station WHAS as the first major broadcasting station for Kentucky, Indiana – indeed as one of the first stations for a significant portion of the Midwestern United States and beyond. Perched atop the newspaper offices of the *Courier-Journal* and *The Louisville Times*, in the Fireproof Storage Company building at the corner of Third and Liberty Streets, WHAS’s founder, Robert Worth Bingham, envisioned the station reaching “the farthest confines of the state, where a man can string an aerial from his cabin to the nearest pine tree, and setting before the fire, have a pew in church, a seat at the opera, or a desk at the university.”¹ In rising to meet these expectations however -- as many radio stations that survived the tumultuous decade of the 1920s would -- WHAS struggled with what radio historian David Goodman calls “the endemic creative tension between American radio’s entertainment and its educational and civic purposes.” Goodman’s work attempts a counter-narrative of the development of the American system of broadcasting arguing

¹ Quoted in Francis M. Nash, *Towers Over Kentucky: A History of Radio and Television in the Bluegrass State* (Lexington: Host Communications, Inc., 1995), 13-14. Nash’s work does not include a bibliography and this author’s research has not revealed the original source of the quote. It appears in variation throughout decades of *Courier-Journal* coverage however, never in this exact order.

that radio, in particular radio in the United States, had a “civic legitimation and a commercial function, which meant it was always attempting to change ideas and behavior, striving to create active and informed listeners, as well as to entertain.”² By the end of the decade, this tension had increased with the development of the national networks whose corporately-sponsored syndicated programs exploited the medium’s commercial potential to the detriment of its unique ability to educate and inform. American intellectuals feared syndicated programming would produce “a mass society – homogenized and centralized with little regard for individuals.”³ These fears compounded in the face of emerging cross-media conglomerates which invoked suspicions of monopoly over the control and distribution of information. Media historian Michael Stamm argues that newspapers, such as Louisville’s *Courier-Journal* and *The Louisville Times*, entered into radio broadcasting to “create a new kind of media corporation that utilized multiple media to circulate information and generate profits.” Going further, Stamm states those “multimedia corporations were central to the legal and political processes structuring the American public sphere in the twentieth century.”⁴ With the realization of its immense profitability in the 1930s, the dilution of radio broadcasting in the United States from a civic-minded tool of cultural uplift to an outlet of entertainment was complete.

In light of the above observations this work argues that, while a component of a regional media empire caught up in the heady early idealism of radio, station WHAS

² David Goodman, *Radio's Civic Ambition: American Broadcasting and Democracy in the 1930s* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2011), xv.

³ Bruce Lenthall, “Critical Reception: Public Intellectuals Decry Depression-era Radio, Mass Culture, and Modern America,” in *Radio Reader: Essays in the Cultural History of Radio*, ed. Michelle Hilmes and Jason Loviglio (New York: Routledge, 2002), 41.

⁴ Michael Stamm, *Sound Business: Newspapers, Radio, and the Politics of New Media* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2011), 3.

made a valiant effort to maintain a civic responsibility to its listeners as radio evolved from utopian utility to a viable and lucrative commercial business. This work demonstrates that despite operation under the flagship newspapers of the Bingham empire, WHAS grew as its own separate entity under the exclusive supervision and guidance of original station manager, Credo Harris, and how such esteemed ownership and management ensured WHAS emerged on the other end of radio broadcasting's turbulent first decade. As a testament to the Bingham family's commitment to public service, not only did the family publishing fortune guarantee WHAS's survival, it promised a continual source of financial reinvestment in the medium's rapidly developing technology, even in the face of recurrent monetary losses. This commitment enabled increases in transmitting power, better facilities, and equipment which allowed the station to reach beyond Kentucky's farthest confines and serve broad swaths of a diverse listenership.

Finally, this work suggests that through its 1927 affiliation with the National Broadcasting Company, its 1933 transition to the Columbia Broadcasting System, and its eventual financial independence as a result, WHAS's attempts to serve the community through providing quality entertainment, educational, and news programming began to lose its local and regional voice as network programming became more prominent on radio throughout the country. More often than not, serious sustaining programs suffered when faced with meeting the bottom line. And yet, network programming and the revenues it provided did not prevent the efforts that culminated in the station's finest moment: its coverage of the 1937 Ohio River flood, which proved indispensable to rescue efforts throughout the Louisville community and enthralled listeners throughout the

country and across the world. This history of station WHAS's first decades illuminates, on a small scale, the evolution and accompanying growing pains of one of the most essential forms of mass media developed in the twentieth century; a medium which still plays a large role in present everyday life in the United States.

The Historiography

Every medium of information has made names – and meanwhile, values. New media have meant new values. Since the dawn of history, each new medium has tended to undermine an old monopoly, shift the definitions of goodness and greatness, and alter the climate of men's lives.⁵

-- Erik Barnouw

Radio broadcasting's impact on the twentieth century cannot be overstated. As observed by media historian and critic, Erik Barnouw, the emergence of radio signaled the pinnacle of the printed press's public dominance and ushered in a new technological modernity where continuous sound – controlled through the manipulation of an electrical device -- altered the way people received and processed information. Despite advances made by the wire telegraph, before radio's emergence news could take days to reach rural townships isolated far from urban centers. Furthermore, urban residents had at their disposal access to concert halls, the theater, vaudeville, and motion pictures while their rural counterparts had the family piano and maybe, if fortunate enough, a phonograph

⁵ Erik Barnouw, *A Tower in Babel: A History of Broadcasting in the United States, Volume I – to 1933* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1966), 3. This work is part of Barnouw's essential three-volume, *A History of Broadcasting in the United States* published between 1966 and 1968. The other two volumes are entitled *The Golden Web* and *The Image Empire*. For other broad works on broadcasting history see J. Fred MacDonald, *Don't Touch That Dial! Radio Programming in American Life, 1920 – 1960* (Chicago: Nelson-Hall Inc., 1979) and Michele Hilmes, *Radio Voices: American Broadcasting, 1922-1952* (Minneapolis: The University of Minnesota Press, 1997), Susan J. Douglas, *Listening In: Radio and the American Imagination* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2004), Susan Smulyan, *Selling Radio: The Commercialization of American Broadcasting, 1920-1934* (Washington D.C.: Smithsonian Institution Press, 1994), and Douglas B. Craig, *Fireside Politics: Radio and Political Culture in the United States, 1920-1940* (Baltimore: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 2000).

with a few scant recordings. Radio, however, leveled the playing field. Its instantaneous nature afforded many citizens the opportunity to inform themselves on an unprecedented level. It exposed millions to entertainment and cultural aspects otherwise unavailable to them. To emphasize the significance of this new medium, a modern comparison may be how the internet has altered the traditional ways Americans access information and entertainment through print, television, and yes, even radio.⁶ Yet unlike television and the internet -- arguably the two giants of modern mass media who, despite their brief existences, cast long historiographical shadows -- radio lacks in great quantities the glory bestowed upon its mass media cousins.

Concrete reasons exist for this lack of historical depth. As media historian Michele Hilmes observes in, *Radio Voices: American Broadcasting, 1922-1952*, establishing a complete historical foundation for the beginning of radio broadcasting in the United States proves difficult when “so much of what was actually broadcast – the sounds and stories actually experienced by listeners – went out live, unrecorded, and with very little record keeping.” Radio and media historians face the realization that “many – the vast majority – of broadcast hours are lost forever,” while many others “must be pieced together out of scripts, press accounts, and reminiscences.” Due to this problem of evidence, a top-down thematic narrative extends over the arch of radio historiography because, as Hilmes points out, “what does exist tends to privilege the dominant and centralized sources . . . more likely to survive than those that actually may be of more

⁶ In her book, *Only Connect*, Michele Hilmes writes that before commercial broadcasting cemented itself as the dominant form of radio, amateur operators envisioned radio as “a medium of open, individual access,” with “little centralized control,” much like the internet, offering opportunities “to be both active originators as well as passive receivers.” Unlike the internet however, with radio “it took a concerted effort by big business and government, feeding on the elite public’s fear of the masses, to change that vision to the highly centralized, one-way, restricted access system that is broadcasting.” See Michele Hilmes, *Only Connect: A Cultural History of Broadcasting in the United States*, 3rd ed. (Boston: Wadsworth Cengage Learning, 2011), 31-35.

interest to a post-structuralist scholar.”⁷ If it is demanding for historians to construct a coherent history of radio at the macro-level, this helps explain why publication of singular station histories are rare: the sources do not exist in any great amount as such that an occasional work outside of article length can be produced. This lack of historical work is unfortunate because, “The broadcaster’s past in his own community or state is interwoven with the social, political, economic, and cultural fabric of his area,” and “few fields of endeavor cut across so many lines of interest to society as does broadcasting.”⁸ As it stands, the lack of existing statistical data means dozens, if not hundreds, of stations and their stories will never be told.⁹

Nevertheless, in the face of this disparity there are some existing examples, two of which fit into Hilmes’s observation about dominant and centralized sources. The American Telephone and Telegraph Company commissioned a former assistant vice president of public relations, William Peck Banning, to compile a history on the company’s foray into radio broadcasting. The resulting, *Commercial Broadcasting Pioneer: The WEA F Experiment, 1922-1926*, was not intended to be “an official history;” rather, it was “to be made part of the record of the American Company and deposited in the Company’s historical museum.” Yet Banning realized the fundamental exceptionalism of WEA F within the framework of radio broadcasting as the station’s

⁷ Hilmes, *Radio Voices*, xvi. Because of the lack of sources for “small stations providing a different service to a more marginalized audience,” Hilmes sticks primarily to the archives of NBC for the basis of her research.

⁸ Wesley Herndon Wallace, “The Development of Broadcasting in North Carolina, 1922-1948.” (PhD. Diss., Duke University, 1962), iii.

⁹ In 1926, Economist Hiram L. Jome published *Economics in the Radio Industry* (Chicago: A.W. Shaw & Co., 1926) which, in addition to giving a brief summation of radio’s history up to that point, concentrated on the proliferation of radio stations within the decade and the need for government regulation. To illustrate how big the broadcasting boom was, in September 1921 there were three stations licensed to broadcast. By July of next year, there were 458. By 1925, this figure came close to equaling the number of stations that had ceased operation.

formation centered on answering a “question of vital concern to America because of broadcasting’s sudden emergence upon the communications scene – the question of radio’s *economic* development as a public communications service.” Banning’s work illuminates Bell Systems engineers’ experimentation with toll broadcasting that would become the eventual springboard for network broadcasting.¹⁰

On the other end of the spectrum, Randall Davidson’s *9XM Talking: WHA Radio and the Wisconsin Idea*, focused on the development of educational radio nationally, but more specifically the efforts of the University of Wisconsin and its radio station WHA, one of the first broadcasting stations in the United States.¹¹ Davidson acknowledges non-commercial radio’s limited appearance throughout the historiography and stated much like Hilmes that this may be due in large part because “as an industry, broadcast radio has been a mediocre steward of its history.” Fortunately for Davidson, WHA’s history has been preserved in part because of its affiliation with the university, but more importantly through the efforts of its early staff that recognized “the pioneering nature of their work.”¹² An irony exists with Banning and Davidson’s books -- two of the sole published monographs devoted to singular radio stations – because from the very

¹⁰ William Peck Banning. *Commercial Broadcasting Pioneer: The WEAJ Experiment, 1922-1926* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1946), xx-xxi; xxv. Emphasis is the author’s. AT&T’s broadcasting efforts are also discussed in Steve Wurtzler’s article, “AT&T Invents Public Access Broadcasting in 1923: A Foreclosed Model for American Radio,” in *Communities of the Air: Radio Century, Radio Culture* ed. Susan Merrill Squier (Durham: Duke University Press, 2003), 39-62.

¹¹ WHA self-proclaims to be the oldest station in the nation yet this is a claim disputed by several different stations on opposite ends of the country. None other than the president of RCA himself, David Sarnoff, claimed “too many people worked in the dark and when the lights went on, nothing was too clear about what happened previously. . . . I believe that the answer . . . is lost beyond recall in the early unrecorded days of broadcasting.” See R. Franklin Smith, “Oldest Station in the Nation”? *Journal of Broadcasting* 4, no. 1 (Winter 1959-1960), 40-55. Many scholars agree however, that Westinghouse station KDKA in Pittsburgh is the oldest broadcasting station in the United States. See Joseph E. Baudino and John M. Kiltross, “Broadcasting’s Oldest Stations: An Examination of Four Claimants,” *Journal of Broadcasting* 21, no. 1 (Winter 1977), 61-84.

¹² Randall Davidson, *9XM Talking: WHA Radio and the Wisconsin Idea* (Madison: The University of Wisconsin Press, 2006), xi.

beginning commercial radio interests and proponents of educational radio stations were at odds, and even more so after the emergence of the National Broadcasting Company and the Columbia Broadcasting System.¹³

Dissertations exist on several individual radio stations but again, because sources are scarce, the resulting body of work is as well. Bruce A. Linton's 1951 dissertation focused on radio programming in Chicago through stations WMAQ and WGN. Throughout his ten year history of the two stations Linton observed that "philosophies of programming, as reflected by programming trends, were not basically disturbed" by radio's change in purpose, "from 'public service' to 'business.'" In the face of increasing commercialization, radio stations' "stated [programming] philosophies did not change," although their "actual patterns of programs did change." All stations shifted away from more serious programming aspects such as educational talks and classical music to lighter entertainment.¹⁴ Lawrence W. Lichty examined four decades of programming over the course of a massive three volume study on Cincinnati's superpower station WLW in order to "derive a set of factors that explain why changes and trends in types of programming take place." Lichty concluded that outside of the station's brief technological dominance within the broadcasting industry the evolutionary arch of WLW and its programming mirrored Linton's observations of WMAQ and WGN, as did many if not most of the larger broadcasting stations in the United States.¹⁵

¹³ This conflict will be discussed at greater length in Chapter Two.

¹⁴ See Bruce A. Linton, "A History of Chicago Radio Station Programming, 1921-1931, with Emphasis on Stations WMAQ and WGN." (PhD Diss., Northwestern University, 1951), iii, 353.

¹⁵ See Lawrence W. Lichty, "'The Nation's Station:' A History of Radio Station WLW." (PhD Diss., Ohio State University, 1964), 2-3. WLW was the only station authorized to broadcast at 500,000 watts power in United States history. A brief discussion concerning this matter will be covered in Chapter Four.

Jerry Wayne Rinks's research centered on developing a written document of the first twenty-five years of Nashville's radio station WSM; Donald Charles Matthews sought to uncover the "possible reasons" for Newark station WOR's success, "within the perspective of its almost fifty years of development in the competition of the New York market." Unlike Linton and Lichty, Rinks and Matthews devoted a majority of their attention and research on constructing an overall historical narrative of their two stations rather than focusing on one aspect such as programming. Whether on a small or large scale, these works share a commonality with what this work hopes to achieve: illuminating an overlooked component in local and media history. These works also stand as sources for comparative analysis as each station's methodology and approach to broadcasting serves to highlight just what, if any, ways WHAS exceeded the norm or fell below par during its early efforts to understand and produce its daily broadcasts.¹⁶

Importance of Study

Swept over by decades of neglect are the past figures, places, and events of WHAS as well as the station's actions, locations and importance within both the local community and the broadcasting industry. For almost thirty years, WHAS radio laid at the forefront of broadcasting in the United States. Executive members of its staff consulted with presidents, attended national conferences, headed national radio associations, and were called upon to testify on all matters of broadcasting before both the Federal Radio and Communications Commissions. Trade journals marveled at every new equipment upgrade the station made while other publications highlighted its

¹⁶ Jerry Wayne Rinks, "We Shield Millions: a History of WSM, 1925-1950." (PhD Diss., University of Tennessee, 1993); Donald Charles Matthews, "The Public Interest Factor and Management Philosophy in the History and Commercial Operation of Radio Station WOR-AM, New York, 1922-1970." (PhD Diss., University of Southern California, 1973), 2.

ingenuity, admired its efforts in education, and lauded its devotion to its community in times of need. And yet, WHAS almost never receives considerable mention within the present historiography and very little has been written on it.¹⁷ Stamm's work, *Sound Business*, concentrates on the role of the newspaper in the development of broadcasting in the United States, a "significantly overlooked" aspect within the medium's historiography. And yet, WHAS is never mentioned in the work, not even after the one occurrence of the *Courier-Journal* appears.¹⁸ Opening the third chapter of his *Emergency Broadcasting and 1930s American Radio*, Edward Miller states, "The reporting of the explosion of the *Hindenburg* was the first example of a 'live' eyewitness broadcast of a major disaster." This event, Miller writes, signified a "key moment in radio broadcasting." WLS announcer Herb Morrison's emotional description of the disaster had "the impact of the real 'you are there' testimony." The problem with this statement is Miller has overlooked the reporting of WHAS during the devastating Ohio River flood four months prior to the *Hindenburg* crash. Using short-wave transmitters, announcers reported many eyewitness accounts throughout the city of Louisville and beyond.¹⁹

This overlook can be blamed in large part on the mediocre stewardship, as Davidson calls it, by the very people who were active participants at the Louisville

¹⁷ In 1981, *Kentucky Historical Society Register* published an article on WHAS by former Director of University of Kentucky's Oral History Program, Terry Birdwhistell. As it stands today, this is the only published scholarly work concerning the station's early history. Over the course of 1979 and 1980, Birdwhistell was instrumental in conducting and compiling an oral history of the station through interviews with surviving early employees. Excerpts from these interviews appear throughout this work. He is now Dean of Libraries at the University. See Terry Birdwhistell, "WHAS Radio and the Development of Broadcasting in Kentucky, 1922-1942," *Kentucky Historical Society Register*, 79, No. 4 (Oct. 1981), 333-353.

¹⁸ Stamm, *Sound Business*, 6, 113-114.

¹⁹ Edward D. Miller, *Emergency Broadcasting and 1930s American Radio* (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 2003), 48. Miller puts quotations around the word live because Morrison's account was not aired until the day after the disaster. The *Hindenburg* crashed in May 1937. The flood began in mid-January and continued into the first weeks of February.

station. As an example, Joe C. Fox, who retired from WHAS as Assistant Technical Director, confessed that after a 1949 change in office and studio facilities WHAS discarded “truckloads of old relics and stuff that . . . should have ever been thrown away . . . even some of the old first programs, logs, and things of that sort.”²⁰ Now, through extensive newspaper coverage, oral histories, and one enlightening memoir among many other disparate sources, this work aims to piece together the remains and emphasize WHAS’s important contributions to the development of commercial radio broadcasting in the hopes of reclaiming its rightful position as one of the pioneering radio broadcasting stations in the country.

Overview

WHAS’s original personnel are introduced in Chapter One. The chapter covers the station’s intended purposes from owner/publisher Robert W. Bingham, how station manager Credo Harris followed through with those intentions, the newspapers’ promotion and support of the station, and the public’s reaction. The construction of the original studios and transmitter are included. It is important to note throughout all chapters that any and all details concerning facilities, be it studios or transmitting sites, are included as they have either been demolished, renovated beyond recognition, or fallen into disrepair. As such, they are representative of the ephemeral nature of not just WHAS but of radio broadcasting itself and the American quality of discarding with the old in favor of the new. The great majority of the chapter focuses on Harris’s innovative contributions towards developing entertainment programming, including experiments with reception and remote broadcasts, music performances, religious services, and sports

²⁰ Joe C. Fox, interviewed by Terry L. Birdwhistell, Louisville, Kentucky, October 31, 1979, History of Broadcasting in Kentucky Collection, Margaret I. King Library, University of Kentucky, Lexington, KY.

reporting. As a result, the majority of the research places emphasis on the first several years of the station with references to later periods when appropriate. The chapter concludes with WHAS's affiliation with NBC, and later with CBS, and the implications network affiliation had for locally generated programming.

Ending the first chapter with network programming and affiliation helps transition into educational programming, the subject of Chapter Two. From its inception, radio's founders and early participants envisioned the medium being a positive influence, bringing high culture and education into the home, especially those homes sheltering the rural population of the United States. As such, this chapter traces WHAS's educational programming, culminating in their partnership with the University of Kentucky for a series of radio lectures conducted by University staff and their partnership in establishing listening centers throughout isolated Eastern Kentucky communities. WHAS and the university intended, although not exclusively designed, a great portion of their collaborative programming for Kentucky's agricultural communities and as such, the impact of agricultural radio on rural communities and listener reception is examined as well. The networks and their effects on educational programming within WHAS will surface mid-chapter, as will a brief discussion on the Radio Act of 1927, the Communications Act of 1934, and their resulting outcomes. A brief overview of the 1946 Peabody Award-winning series, "Wake Up, Kentucky!" concludes the discussion.

Chapter Three focuses on the civic responsibility of the radio station. Throughout its first two decades, WHAS found ways to use the radio not just for entertainment, but for aiding families in locating missing persons and lost children as well as helping the police combat criminal activity. As remote broadcasting technology improved, so did

news coverage, especially on-the-scene reporting. In 1925 this ability was first evident at Sand Cave, Kentucky when amateur explorer Floyd Collins became trapped in a cavern. The human interest story captivated a national audience through both print and radio. Radio coverage of events such as this incident ruffled the feathers of newspaper publishers igniting a Press-Radio War in the early 1930s. As a result, an examination of WHAS and its relationship with its parent company is conducted in greater detail. However, the majority of the chapter focuses on WHAS's 187 1/2 hours of continuous coverage during the 1937 Ohio River flood, arguably the finest moment in the station's history.

The last chapter analyzes the financial cost of remaining competitive in radio broadcasting. In 1938, WHAS opened a new transmitting plant in Eastwood, Kentucky. The details of the plant's construction and cost help transition to the subject of superpower, clear channel stations, and the attempted sale of WHAS. Finally, this work concludes with radio's declining influence brought on by the rise of television and a brief summation of station WHAS throughout the succeeding decades. It must be noted that by grouping the chapters thematically, a cohesive chronological order will be impossible. However, each chapter presents a detailed, natural extension of its predecessor.

Kentucky's Forgotten Role in Early Radio

While WHAS was radio broadcasting's earliest success story in Louisville and Kentucky, it was not its first station. In fact, a radio station already existed in the city upon Bingham's decision to start his own. William Virgil Jordan was one out of dozens of amateur radio operators in the city who tinkered with transmission and reception in a corner room of his Big-Six Auto Repair Shop and Battery Service Firm located at 306 W.

Breckenridge Street. By 1915, Jordan obtained an experimental license with the call letters 9LK from the Department of Commerce and moved from transmitting telegraphically to broadcasting. Shut down during World War I – as the government ordered all amateurs to do so – Jordan resumed broadcasting afterwards at whim. In 1921 he installed radio receivers at the Waverly Hills Sanitarium where he broadcast music from his phonograph to the hospital’s convalescing patients. However, Jordan is nearly forgotten in Louisville’s radio history because of his apathy towards broadcasting as a profession. On September 15, 1922 he sought and received a license to broadcast with the call letters WLAP using 15 watts of power at 360 meters. However, being on the same frequency with vastly inferior equipment than that of WHAS – by September of that year, already on the air – caused Jordan to lose interest and in 1926 he sold WLAP.²¹

However, Kentucky’s history concerning radio runs deeper than the efforts of Jordan or Bingham’s stations and involves a mysterious individual from Murray, Kentucky named Nathan B. Stubblefield. Describing himself as a “practical farmer, fruit grower, and electrician,” and remembered by many as a “strange and difficult man both as a husband and a father,” Stubblefield was born in either 1859 or 1860. After abandoning the small boarding school he attended in Farmington, Kentucky at the age of fifteen, he drifted between various interests before devoting his efforts to experimenting with electricity. Married at the age of twenty-one, Stubblefield raised a family on an eighty-five acre plot by means of a subsistent income he spent more often than not on his

²¹ Lewis Owens, *WLAP Through Sixty Years: 1922-1982* (Lexington, KY: Lewis Owens/Filson Historical Society, 1982), 1-5; Nash, *Towers Over Kentucky*, 12-18. No newspaper record of Jordan or any of his radio exploits exists. Some Louisville residents referred to Jordan’s station as “Big Six,” after his shop. WLAP was sold first to Virginia Avenue Baptist Church and then to several owners. In 1932, WLAP was purchased by George Norton, III who would be responsible for starting radio station WAVE the following year.

failed inventions. Paranoid over Murray citizens' presumed interest in his work, Stubblefield devised a rudimentary alarm system of wired bells that alerted him to any visitors crossing on to his property. All six of his children were educated at home lest they be approached by someone and reveal the nature of any of his scientific experiments.²² Those experiments, Stubblefield hoped, would revolutionize communication throughout the world by determining and perfecting the process of transmitting the human voice wirelessly through the air.

In 1947 during sworn testimony in front of the Federal Communications Commission, Dr. Rainey T. Wells stated while on the Stubblefield farm in 1892, he participated in a wireless conversation with the inventor. Instructed to take a telephone receiver from Stubblefield's small workshop shack and walk towards the family's apple orchard, Wells claimed the words, "Hello, Rainey" came out of the receiver, startling him. Changing direction and moving from side to side did little to impede the clarity of Stubblefield's words. Wells estimated they were separated by a distance of two to three thousand feet. Stubblefield's childhood friend, Duncan Holt told a similar story but placed the date of his experience in 1885. After being invited to the farm, Stubblefield confided in his friend, "Duncan, I've done it. I've been able to talk without wires . . . all of two hundred yards . . . and it will work everywhere." While Holt and his wife stayed in the house, Stubblefield spoke to them from his workshop. If Holt's story is valid, Stubblefield's experiments placed him at the forefront of innovation in communications technology. But how was this possible? After all, it was only eight years prior the world

²² Thomas Olin Morgan, "The Contribution of Nathan B. Stubblefield to the Invention of Wireless Voice Communication," (PhD. Diss., Florida State University, 1971), 15-18; 21-25; Thomas W. Hoffer "Nathan B. Stubblefield and his Wireless Telephone," *Journal of Broadcasting* 15, no. 3 (Summer, 1971), 318; "Wonderful New Invention of Nathan Stubblefield," *The St. Louis Republic*, January 12, 1902.

witnessed the birth of one of the most significant inventions in modern history and by the time Stubblefield prepared to make his experiments public, he was one of many names in the new communications field. Although he could not have anticipated the course of events before him, Stubblefield was doomed from the very beginning.²³

An Industry Hatched From a Thousand Eggs

Stubblefield devoured scientific journals and was therefore a keen observer of the rapid technological progression that defined the late nineteenth century. However revolutionary he considered his findings, he faced the daunting task of competing with a long list of scientists who possessed the years of formal education, experience, publicity, and economic independence he himself lacked. This list of names began in 1844 with Samuel Morse and the debut of his electromagnetic telegraph which revolutionized point-to-point communications throughout the world. And yet it was not until the conspicuous lecture tour of one young man three decades later that scientific developments in the field of communications caught fire.

An 1877 handbill circulated through Lawrence, Massachusetts promised an evening in which “vocal and instrumental music and conversation will be transmitted a distance of 27 miles and be received” by those choosing to attend at City Hall. Printed by the new Bell Telephone Company, the invitations came courtesy of the company’s namesake, Alexander Graham Bell who invited the town to witness the wonders of his new invention, the telephone.²⁴ Stated within his patent application the previous year, Bell visualized the telephone as “a method of, and apparatus for, transmitting vocal and

²³ “Broadcasting Born in Murray, Wells says,” *Courier-Journal*, January 25, 1947, sec. 2, 2; Edward Freeman, “He Invented Radio but Died a Pauper,” *Courier-Journal Sunday Magazine*, March 26, 1939, 5; Morgan, “The Contributions of Nathan B. Stubblefield,” 74-77.

²⁴ Banning, *Commercial Broadcasting Pioneer: The WEAJ Experiment, 1922-1926*, 3.

other sounds telegraphically.”²⁵ To emphasize the multiple applications of his invention Bell proceeded on a tour of lecture-demonstrations. *The New York Times* described one such occasion when on May 17, 1877 in front of an audience of 300 people at Chickering Hall, Bell conducted an “exhaustive discussion of the transmission of sound and the history of the telephone, illustrated by a number of complex and not very intelligible images cast upon a prepared background by means of a stereopticon.” For the program’s final act, an organ with a rigged telephone attachment performed three songs thirty-two miles away in New Brunswick, New Jersey. A question and answer session between Bell and New Brunswick followed before a final song’s transmission concluded the program and members of the audience “were enabled to hear with great distinctness by passing by the instrument on the stage and placing their ears in close proximity to its mouth.”²⁶

Bell’s demonstrations should have marked the humble beginnings of radio telephony. However, in its celebration of the telephone’s first decade, *The New York Times* made no mention of its use for any purpose other than person-to-person communication. By then the Bell Telephone Company, operating under the auspices of the American Telephone and Telegraph Company was busy concentrating all its efforts on beating out Western Union and the telegraph; a competition, at that time, they were losing.²⁷ By the next decade, the periodical *Electrical Engineer* lamented the telephone interests’ inability to do “more towards exploiting a field which could certainly be made a source of considerable revenue by the furnishing of musical and other entertainment by

²⁵ Quoted in Barnouw, *A Tower in Babel*, 7.

²⁶ “Sound and Electricity: Lecture by Prof. Alexander Graham Bell – An Exhibition of the Speaking Telephone,” *The New York Times*, May 18, 1877.

²⁷ “The Telephone: What Has Been Done in Its First Ten Years,” *The New York Times*, January 1, 1886.

wire at the fireside.”²⁸ However, this decade -- the 1890s, near the dawn of a new century – witnessed unprecedented scientific and technological breakthroughs by powerful personalities who maneuvered their way through a tangled, mad-dash race for first in exploiting the development of wireless communication, the forerunner to radio broadcasting.

As Samuel Morse’s telegraph and Bell’s telephone drew the world closer together through wires, members of the scientific community began formulating the necessary components to begin experimentations for communicating through the air. It was a long and complicated process as one article in the inaugural May 1922 issue of *Radio Broadcast* magazine highlighted: “Most inventions, especially if they are of the highly complicated nature of the radio telephone, must spend a long period of incubation in the laboratory, under the constant nursing of a corps of inventors and technicians.”²⁹ In 1873, James Clerk Maxwell first published his theory on electromagnetic radiation which “showed that energy may be radiated from an electric circuit and that this energy shaken free from the circuit follows the same laws as does ordinary light.”³⁰ Fifteen years passed before Heinrich Hertz proved Maxwell’s theory correct. After generating sparks from a rudimentary transformer which radiated through an antenna across his laboratory, Hertz successfully measured the velocity of radio waves thereby discovering the “radiofrequency spectrum” of electromagnetic radiation. In his book, *Syntony and Spark* -- *The Origins of Radio*, Hugh G. J. Aitken emphasizes the importance of this event:

²⁸ “Possibilities of the Telephone,” *Electrical Engineer* 9, no. 103 (April 23, 1890): 258; Banning, *Commercial Broadcasting Pioneer*, 4.

²⁹ C. Austin, “The Romance of the Radio Telephone,” *Radio Broadcast* 1, no. 1 (May, 1922), 9.

³⁰ J.H. Morecroft, “What Everyone Should Know About Radio History,” *Radio Broadcast* 1, no. 3 (July, 1922), 204.

Hertz's discovery of the radiofrequency spectrum of electromagnetic radiation was in many ways analogous to the discovery of a new continent. . . . Here were new resources – invisible resources, to be sure – whose existence had previously been a matter of speculation only; resources, indeed, that mankind had never before known how to use and whose value was to remain conjectural for many years after their initial discovery.³¹

Hertz succumbed to blood poisoning at the age of 36 leaving his work unfinished and further developments in the burgeoning scientific field in the hands of others.

Afterwards, various names emerged in the scientific community contributing small pieces to the puzzle. Building off a design by French professor and scientist Edouard Branly, in 1894 Britain's Oliver Lodge published his findings on the development of a coherer which detected electromagnetic waves better than Hertz's rudimentary single-loop wire.³² No other name however, towered over the early development of wireless communication than that of Guglielmo Marconi.

Born to an Italian father and Irish mother descended from the Scotch-Irish Jameson distilling family, Marconi showed no early signs of remarkability. A quiet, "delicate lad who shrank from rugged play," it was not until his teen years that Marconi, inspired after reading an article on Hertzian waves, delved into scientific study and experimentation. Through the persuasion of his mother, Marconi received private instruction under University of Bologna professor of physics, Augusto Righi and secluded himself in the upper floor of his parents' villa where, much to his father's disapproval, he consumed himself in his experiments. Using Hertz's method of

³¹ Hugh G. J. Aitken, *Syntony and Spark -- The Origins of Radio*, (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1985), 31-32.

³² Branly discovered that "no matter how good a conductor a metal might be in bulk, if finely shaved into bits, its resistance was very great, indeed." He devised a six-inch glass tube containing metal filings. Lodge's improvement concerned the inclusion of a tapper or "decoherer" which restored the high resistance of the metal filings after contact with electrical waves. Susan J. Douglas, *Inventing American Broadcasting, 1899-1922* (Baltimore: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 1987), 13-14; Aitken, *Syntony and Spark*, 102-108.

generating electrical energy through a spark crossing a gap and adding Lodge's coherer as a receiver, Marconi attached both to a Morse key lying at the beginning of the sequence. To this, Marconi added his key contribution of an antenna and a grounding system and, after ringing bells around the home using Hertzian waves, took to his parents property to test his apparatus at greater distances.³³

With successful tests of the apparatus throughout the family property, and the full attention of his once-dismissive father, the Marconi family solicited the attention of the Italian government who declined to observe the young scientist's findings. As a result, in February 1896 Marconi and his mother sailed for England where upon arrival, paranoid British customs officials destroyed the young man's wire and coil-filled black box. This distressing episode was one of the last for Marconi for on July 2, 1897 his mother's family connections helped him secure a patent and form Marconi's Wireless Telegraph Company, Ltd.³⁴ Within two years, he reported the Kingstown Regatta and the America's Cup yacht races and secured his reputation internationally by capturing the imagination of the world when he sent and received wireless telegraphic messages across the Atlantic Ocean.³⁵

Historian Susan Douglas highlights one important distinction concerning Marconi's place in the development of what became radio broadcasting: his concentration centered on the perfection and practicability of wireless telegraphy. "He

³³ Orrin E. Dunlap, Jr., *Marconi: The Man and His Wireless* (New York: The Macmillan Company, 1937), 9; 11-18; Degna Marconi, *My Father, Marconi* (New York: McGraw-Hill Book Company, Inc., 1962), 20-24; Barnouw, *A Tower in Babel*, 10-11; Douglas, *Inventing American Broadcasting*, 14-15.

³⁴ British customs officials' paranoia stemmed from multiple assassination attempts on Queen Victoria's life and the assassination of French President Carnot by an Italian anarchist two years prior. Coupled with their inability to comprehend the young scientist's explanations for the device's purpose and use, they simply destroyed it. Marconi, *My Father, Marconi*, 36.

³⁵ Barnouw, 13.

meant to have the thing pay,” she wrote. Criticized by the educated scientific community much in the same way as Edison – lack of formal training and a reliance more on applied research than theoretical study -- Marconi faced accusations of using “in combination certain apparatus which were devised and used by others before him.” But as Douglas points out, however, these accusations missed the point:

While it was true that Marconi’s basic components were not new It was the special combination of these components into a system, and a determined application of that system to commercial and naval communications, which made Marconi’s contribution special. Thus, there was a reasonable and persuasive retort to this charge.³⁶

The New York Times understood this when it reported in January 1898 that Marconi “has produced from known means a new electrical eye more delicate than any known electrical instrument, and a new system of telegraphy that will reach places hitherto inaccessible.”³⁷ Reflecting back later in life, Marconi himself was surprised at his luck in this discovery. “My chief trouble,” he commented, “was that the idea was so elementary, so simple in logic that it seemed difficult to believe no one else had thought of putting it in practice.”³⁸

Yet Marconi was incorrect in his recalled presumptuousness. During his early experimentation he hesitated to read up on any similar scientific developments “lest he read that the goal . . . had been reached” before him.³⁹ Arguably, had he taken the time to do so would have altered the course of history and yet by not doing so, his path to success guaranteed future obstacles and controversies. In October 1899, Tufts professor of physics Amos Emerson Dolbear attempted unsuccessfully to sue Marconi for patent

³⁶ Douglas, 16; 31

³⁷ “Marconi’s Telegraphy,” *The New York Times*, January 23, 1898.

³⁸ Dunlap, Jr., *Marconi: The Man and His Wireless*, 12.

³⁹ Barnouw, 10.

infringement. Dolbear received a patent in 1886 for a system capable of sending messages wirelessly up to a mile and a half that included “induction coils, carbon and condenser telephone transmitters and batteries in a wireless set-up with grounded wires at both ends of a communications link.” A full write-up in the December 11 issue of *Scientific American* that same year detailed the process, although the system’s limited range prevented further development. Regardless of its inefficiency, Dolbear requested Marconi be restricted to experimenting in Europe where Dolbear’s patent did not extend and that Marconi request the professor’s express permission to report the America’s Cup race. Afterwards, Dolbear and his attorney would decide whether or not to impose an injunction.⁴⁰

Claiming to own the rights to Dolbear’s patent, Lyman C. Larned, filed an additional suit in New York that same month. Through his attorney, Henry Prince, Larned stated that on July 22, 1898 Dolbear transferred all rights to his patent and the Dolbear Electric Telephone Company over to him. Larned also stated his own intentions to report the yacht race and informed the *New York Herald* – responsible for Marconi’s invitation to the United States – of the Italian’s infringement.⁴¹ And yet, no proof of further legal action exists; Marconi dismissed Dolbear’s accusations claiming his system of wireless telegraphy “to be something quite different” from that “as practiced under the Marconi patents.” Furthermore, “If Prof. Dolbear had been able to do any practical wireless telegraphy as early as 1866 [sic],” Marconi claimed, “he has certainly been very

⁴⁰ Elliot N. Sivowitch, “A Technological History of Broadcasting’s Prehistory, 1876-1920,” *Journal of Broadcasting* 15, no. 1 (Winter 1970-71), 7; “Disputes Marconi’s Claim,” *The New York Times*, October 6, 1899.

⁴¹ “Wireless Telegraphy Suit,” *The Washington Times*, October 19, 1899.

slow in bringing the matter to the attention of the world.”⁴² On the 16th of October, Marconi reported the race to the *New York Herald* with little controversy and much fanfare.

Even before Dolbear there was Washington dentist, Dr. Mahlon Loomis who experimented in the Blue Ridge Mountains with kites flown from atop opposing peaks. Inspired by the havoc an 1859 auroral storm wreaked on telegraphers, Loomis experimented in an attempt to discover and develop “aerial conduction communication.” While rumored to have successfully sent “intelligible messages” a distance of fourteen miles as early as 1866, detailed documentation does not exist to support or refute these claims. Loomis received a patent on July 30, 1872 but economic panic the following year presumably prevented any further development and Loomis drifted into obscurity.⁴³

Stubblefield’s Fall

This historiographical span between Bell and Marconi is where Stubblefield deserves more than a minor inclusion. If he indeed transmitted his voice wirelessly in 1885 that places him less than a decade after Bell’s telephone and more than a full decade before Marconi’s wireless *telegraph*. His experiments centered on induction and conduction telephony using a constructed electric battery cell housed in a black box.

Former Florida State professor, Thomas W. Hoffer explains the apparatus:

Steel rods were inserted into the ground at the point of transmission and reception. The transmitter device was comprised of a modified Bell-type telephone connected to a large circle of metal which looked very much like an antenna. Wires led from that to [the] black box.⁴⁴

⁴² “Wireless Telegraphy,” *The Wall Street Journal*, October 9, 1899.

⁴³ Barnouw, 18; Sivowitch, “A Technological History of Broadcasting’s Prehistory,” 4; See also “An American Forerunner of Marconi,” *Literary Digest*, July 29, 1922, 25.

⁴⁴ Hoffer, “Nathan B. Stubblefield,” 319. An article in *Scientific American* that spring described the black box’s contents as consisting of dry cell batteries, a generator, and an induction coil. See Waldon Fawcett, “The Latest Advance in Wireless Telephony,” *Scientific American* 86 no. 21 (May 24, 1902): 363.

The inherent problem scientists and historians have with this design is that Stubblefield's black box did not generate any radio frequency oscillations, a crucial component that diminished Stubblefield's capabilities to transmit over greater distances.⁴⁵ In addition to these problems, Stubblefield's scientific and engineering peers had already discovered and abandoned the method of induction and conduction telegraphy. His was a subtle variation of the very method Dolbear received a patent for in 1886.⁴⁶ In spite of these limitations, interest generated from a January 1902 article in *The St. Louis Dispatch* convinced Stubblefield to travel to Washington D.C. and apply for patents as well as conduct demonstrations to generate investor interest. On March 20 that year Stubblefield successfully communicated with the shore while floating in the middle of the Potomac River aboard the steamer ship *Bartholdi*. The results were not perfect but improved with each attempt with land tests proving much more successful.⁴⁷

Stubblefield's decline came with the incorporation of the Wireless Telephone Company of America shortly before the tests in Washington.⁴⁸ Forming a company to promote a product was not an unwise business decision and, as Douglas explains, "Wireless [telegraphy], as a promising new technology, might be an excellent investment for those wanting to get in on the ground floor of a new business." Between 1899 and 1902, all of the major names emerging in wireless technology – Marconi, Reginald Fessenden, Lee De Forest, and John Stone – formed their own companies although in

⁴⁵ *Ibid.*, 325

⁴⁶ Sivowitch, 7.

⁴⁷ "To Try Wireless Telephony," *The New York Times*, March 17, 1902, 1; "Practical Tests of Wireless Telephony," *The Washington Times*, March 20, 1902, 5; "Wireless Telephony Tests," *The New York Times*, March 21, 1902, 2.

⁴⁸ Hoffer claims WTCA was incorporated in Prescott, Arizona on May 22, 1902 and yet, *The Washington Times* reports that it was the WTCA who commissioned the *Bartholdi* for Stubblefield's tests in March of that year. Hoffer, 35.

promoting a form of wireless *telephony*, Stubblefield possessed a marketing edge over his peers.⁴⁹ He signed over all of his patent rights in exchange for stock. Before long he was a victim of fraud. His company partners' sole focus revolved around the sale of stock and as such they awarded Stubblefield no royalties or compensation to improve upon his apparatus. Before one demonstration they attempted to convince Stubblefield to disguise a wire between his transmitters and receivers to increase the efficacy of his equipment. He returned to Murray in disgust, out of money and with no rights to his work yet still determined to perfect the transmission of his invention.⁵⁰

It was while Stubblefield attempted to regroup that he was surpassed by radio's more famous figures. It is these men, such as Marconi and De Forest that grabbed headlines, secured patents, and set in motion the path to radio broadcasting. On the night of Christmas Eve 1906, radio operators aboard ships along the eastern seaboard secured their headsets as a message of "CQ, CQ" in Morse code sprang from their receivers. Expecting the code to continue, they instead heard one after the other a man's speaking voice, a female vocalist and a violin solo. It was Reginald Fessenden broadcasting from his experimental station in Brant Rock, Massachusetts. Historians recognize this as the first successful wireless telephonic broadcast.⁵¹ Meanwhile, Stubblefield's family had abandoned him and he became destitute, living on a friend's property in a tenant shack.

⁴⁹ Douglas, *Inventing American Broadcasting*, 63-64.\

⁵⁰ In February 1902, Lee De Forest, whose major contribution to radio broadcasting would be introducing a grid between the metal plate and filament within a vacuum tube thus increasing its efficacy, first formed the De Forest Wireless Telegraph Company with Abraham White. Unlike Stubblefield, De Forest performed numerous public demonstrations intended for generating interest in stock purchases. White promoted De Forest's experiments with great success and as a result several receiving stations were set-up throughout the country although they were nothing more than fronts for selling more stock. In 1906, the company was dissolved due to legal pressures and De Forest was left to start over. Douglas, 92-98, 168.

⁵¹ Barnouw, 20. "CQ" in Morse code stands for "Calling All Stations."

On a cold morning in April 1928 concerned friends arriving to check in on him found Stubblefield dead from starvation.⁵²

At the time of Stubblefield's death, radio broadcasting was well into its coalescence as a mass-communications medium. In the years immediately following Fessenden's successful experiments, amateur radio operators and figures such as Charles Herrold in San Jose, California, Thomas E. Clark in Detroit, Michigan, Professor Earl Terry at the University of Wisconsin, and Frank Conrad outside of Pittsburgh in Wilkesburg, Pennsylvania pushed the rudimentary technology beyond the confines of point-to-point communication into the new frontier of broadcasting. Simultaneously, the technological developments instigated by the First World War encouraged the growth of already-large corporations such as General Electric, Westinghouse, and the American Telephone and Telegraph Company and helped bring about the founding of the Radio Corporation of America. The war exposed a generation of young men to the new field of radio who returned from duty determined to put their training to use in peace time. The burgeoning industry even had radio stations in Kentucky, one of which received national attention with increasing regularity. Defeated, marginalized, and forgotten, Stubblefield had died alone amid molded stacks of *Scientific American* magazines convinced he was ahead of his time.⁵³

Robert W. Bingham

Another Kentuckian whose contributions to radio within the commonwealth, while not unknown, are obscured by his other achievements is Robert W. Bingham,

⁵² Morgan, "The Contribution of Nathan B. Stubblefield," 37-40.

⁵³ See Gordon R. Greb, "The Golden Anniversary of Broadcasting," *Journal of Broadcasting*, 3, no. 1 (Winter 1958-1959), 3-13; R.J. Mauchlin, "What the Detroit *News* Has Done in Broadcasting," *Radio Broadcast*, (June 1922), 136-141; "History of Broadcasting and KDKA Radio," Public Relations Department, Westinghouse Broadcasting Company, News Release, No Date, 1-34; Barnouw, 33-36, 61-83.

publisher of the *Courier-Journal* and *The Louisville Times*. Bingham kept himself abreast of the latest news and technology and he saw the emerging medium of radio as an opportunity to expand the services already provided by his newspapers. Sitting down for an interview in Louisville, Kentucky on the 8th of February, 1980, Barry Bingham, Sr. explained his father's motivation behind establishing a radio station:

I know that his main thought, always, was to increase knowledge and education among Kentucky people. He felt that there was a great need for more education, not only in the schools but outside the schools. And that there would be many people who would never be reached by newspapers. . . . He felt that there must be some other way to reach people in order to give them all kinds of information, as well as artistic creations, and things of that kind. And he decided that radio would be the best way to do it.⁵⁴

Bingham's path to owning a media empire is mired with personal and public tragedy that makes him a unique figure among publishers and owners of radio stations. Certain examples of secondary literature paint him as a controversial figure when further research reveals he was nothing more than a victim of unfortunate circumstances. Born in Orange County, North Carolina in 1871, he dropped out of the University of North Carolina and the University of Virginia before graduating in 1897 with a law degree from the University of Louisville. He served once as Jefferson County Attorney. Nominated interim mayor of Louisville as a result of the city's tumultuous mayoral election of 1905, he went on to serve ten months as Circuit Court Judge, providing him with the nickname that followed him the remainder of his life. Bingham flip-flopped between political parties and won just one election in which he was nominated, the majority of his brief career in Louisville politics resulting from personal appointments. Returning to the

⁵⁴ Barry Bingham, Sr., interviewed by Terry L. Birdwhistell, Louisville, Kentucky, February 8, 1980, History of Broadcasting in Kentucky Collection, Margaret I. King Library, University of Kentucky, Lexington, Kentucky.

practice of law, Bingham rose in prominence by the middle of the next decade when he combined with the partnerships of fellow lawyers Stanley Sloss, George Cary Tabb, Arthur H. Mann, and Emanuel Levi to create one of the city's largest law firms. In April 1913, tragedy struck when his first wife, Eleanor – the mother of his three children – succumbed to injuries suffered in an automobile accident.⁵⁵

In a stroke of fate, the following month Mary Lily Kenan Flagler became the sole heir to the Standard Oil fortune of Henry Flagler when the tycoon passed away due to complications from a fall. As a result, Kenan Flagler became the wealthiest woman in the United States receiving properties including the tycoon's regal Whitehall in Palm Springs, multiple estates in New York, jewelry, and "the bulk of the Flagler fortune in a trust fund estimated to be worth as much as one hundred million dollars." While it is unclear how and when Bingham and the then-Mary Lily Kenan first met, Bingham biographers agree that the two were acquaintances and perhaps lovers in their youth. Regardless, the two became reacquainted in Asheville, North Carolina in the summer of 1915 and after a year-long courtship were married on November 15, 1916 in the residence of Mr. and Mrs. Pembroke-Jones at 5 East 66th Street in New York City.⁵⁶

⁵⁵ William E. Ellis, "Robert Worth Bingham and Louisville Progressivism, 1905-1910," *The Filson Club History Quarterly* 54, No. 2 (Apr. 1980), 170-172; 188-190; William E. Ellis, *Robert Worth Bingham and the Southern Mystique: From the Old South to the New South and Beyond* (Kent: Kent State Press, 1997), 53; Susan E. Tift and Alex S. Jones, *The Patriarch: The Rise and Fall of the Bingham Dynasty* (New York: Summit Books, 1991), 47-48.

⁵⁶ "Henry Flagler Left 75,000,000 Estate," *The New York Times*, November 20, 1917. Ellis, *Robert W. Bingham and the Southern Mystique*, 54. Ellis claims Mary Lily was a classmate of Bingham's sister Sadie at the Peace Institute, a finishing school in Raleigh. Tift and Jones confirm this as well but claim the two met originally in 1894 at the University of Virginia in Charlottesville. Tift and Jones, *The Patriarch*, 32; 61; Sallie Bingham claims they met in Chapel Hill and the Kenan family's disapproval was the probable cause for their split. Ms. Bingham also prints a scurrilous rumor that her grandfather's creditors, at the news of Henry Flagler's death, offered to buy Bingham a new suit and a train ticket to Florida in the hope of winning her hand in marriage thereby securing the means to settle his debts. Sallie Bingham, *Passion and Prejudice: A Family Memoir* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1989), 133; 143; "To Wed Mrs. Flagler," *The New York Times*, November 6, 1916.

From that point, the details of their relationship begin to muddle. According to a 1933 memorandum by Bingham's personal friend and noted urologist, Dr. Hugh H. Young found within the medical archives of Johns Hopkins University Hospital, upon settling in Louisville after his wedding, Bingham discovered his wife to be a serious alcoholic. Young stated that, "regularly, once a month, under some strange impulse, [Flagler] would shut herself up and drink herself into insensibility," stretching these "episodes" into days-long affairs. In their book, *The Patriarch: The Rise and Fall of the Bingham Dynasty*, journalists Susan E. Tift and Alex S. Jones attribute the development of Kenan Flagler's alcoholism to the numerous parties and social gatherings she hosted at Whitehall where she openly imbibed "fruit juice mixed with grain alcohol." Bingham was so disturbed and embarrassed by his wife's affliction he sought through Young to secure treatment for her at Johns Hopkins. Refusing to consent to treatment, Kenan Flagler's health began to decline not long after the couple settled into their new Glenview home and she was put under the personal care of Bingham's physician, dermatologist Dr. Michael Leo Ravitch. She died in July the following year. Upon discovery that Kenan Flagler drafted a codicil to her will ensuring Bingham \$5 million of her estate upon her death, gossip of conspiracy and foul play began spreading through well-to-do social circles, infuriating members of the Kenan family.⁵⁷

As reported in *The New York Times*, Kenan Flagler's original will made her niece, Louise Wise Lewis the recipient of the bulk of her estate; "the handsome country home" in Louisville and other "portions of the estate," valued at no more than three million

⁵⁷ Ellis, *Robert W. Bingham*, 57; 60; Copy of Hugh Young Notes on Mary Lily Kenan Flagler sent to Aleen Bingham, February 14, 1940, 1 George Barry Bingham Papers. 1861-1989; RWB Correspondence and Misc. Folder 1094 Filson Historical Society, Louisville, KY; Tift and Jones, *The Patriarch*, 60.

dollars, were left to Bingham. Bingham was satisfied with these arrangements having entered into an ante-nuptial agreement with Kenan Flagler at the behest of her trustees.⁵⁸ As a result of the codicil's discovery and, "following a series of rumors" in both New York and Louisville, *The New York Times* reported in September that the Kenan family would exhume the body of Flagler "to determine definitely the cause of her death and set at rest the stories that have been in circulation." According to Dr. Charles T. Nesbitt, County Health Officer in Wilmington, North Carolina, the Kenan family "believed a crime had been committed."⁵⁹ In addition, they filed a complaint in a Louisville court that Mary Lily had requested the codicil under the influence of a foreign substance, an accusation that Bingham's friend and attorney, W.W. Davies – present at the codicil's signing -- testified in court as untrue.⁶⁰ *The New York Times* continued to stoke the fire of intrigue by printing a rumor that Dr. Ravitch was paid a \$50,000 fee and an automobile for his services. The next day, the *Courier-Journal* reported a burglary at the dermatologist's office. Police found Ravitch's desk "forced [open] and painstakingly ransacked," although suspiciously, upon further examination nothing but "the narcotics records pertaining to the case of Mrs. Bingham" were missing.⁶¹ Sadly, the following Monday the ordeal took a gruesome turn when the *Courier* reported on its front page that

⁵⁸ "Mrs. Bingham Dies; Worth 60,000,000," *The New York Times*, July 28, 1917; "Talk of Exhuming Mrs. Bingham's Body," *The New York Times*, September, 21, 1917; Marie Brenner, *House of Dreams: The Bingham Family of Louisville* (New York: Random House, 1988), 105.

⁵⁹ "Kenan Voiced Crime Theory, Says Nesbitt," *Courier-Journal*, September 25, 1917.

⁶⁰ *The New York Times*, September, 21, 1917. The article also reported that Bingham's friends, rising to his defense, contended that he "should have received at least \$25,000,000" of the estate but Bingham never argued for it.

⁶¹ "To Investigate Bingham Rumors," *The New York Times*, September 22, 1917; "Ravitch's Dope Records Seized," *Courier-Journal*, September 22, 1917; "Bingham Grave Opened at 3 A.M.," *Courier-Journal*, September 24, 1917. In the September 22 article the *Courier* also reports that rumors of the \$50,000 fee and automobile paid to Dr. Ravitch were false.

Mary Lily's body had indeed been "exhumed and eviscerated" in Wilmington with "vital parts of the body . . . turned over to someone and taken to New York" for autopsy.⁶²

In a copy of his notes sent to Bingham's widow, Aleen in 1940, Young, upon returning from a European tour, received word from Bingham of his wife's passing and the ensuing maelstrom of controversy surrounding him. In hopes of exonerating his friend, Young contacted two of the pathologists who participated in Kenan Flagler's autopsy who revealed alcoholism as her cause of death and not foul play. The supervising physician in New York did the same, and all three were prepared to sign sworn statements to the fact upon permission from the Kenan family, permission that was denied by Flagler's cousin Will Kenan, of Lockport, New York. Undeterred, Young persuaded Bingham to let him take the information public, but Bingham blocked any such action, confessing such a move would, "again drag [Kenan Flagler's] name through the mire, bring up her terrible drinking habit and besmirch her character. I'd rather bear the ignominy which some people have cast upon me. My friends know it isn't true; they have confidence in me."⁶³ Aware of the toxicology reports, the Kenan family never released the results to the public and newspaper coverage on the matter dwindled and disappeared by late September. With the initial fervor of gossip and speculation reduced to a simmer, the codicil went uncontested and Bingham was exonerated from any wrongdoing. After some delays concerning state inheritance taxes, the will was filed with the

⁶² "Bingham Grave . . .," *Courier-Journal*, September 24, 1917.

⁶³ Young Notes to Aleen Bingham, 2. Young planned to include a chapter on the ordeal in his 1940 autobiography but consented to Aleen's refusal to allow further information, no matter how advantageous to her husband, concerning the matter to be published. Aleen Bingham to Dr. Hugh Young, February 6, 1940, George Barry Bingham Papers. 1861-1989; RWB Correspondence and Misc. Folder 1094, Filson Historical Society, Louisville, KY.

codicil in October awarding him his inheritance.⁶⁴ The controversy surrounding their brief marriage never fully diminished however, and when the Bingham family holdings went up for sale in 1986, biographers interested in the dissolution of a family media empire began delving deeper into the story with wildly speculative results.

In their book, Tift and Jones claim cardiovascular syphilis, contracted through Henry Flagler, as the reason for Kenan Flagler's ailments and the source of alienation between her and Bingham, not the alcoholism claimed by Dr. Young. They also use her purported condition as the motivating factor for drafting the codicil as an effort at redemption in the eyes of her husband. In her memoir, *Passion and Prejudice*, Bingham's controversial granddaughter, Sallie contends the Judge suffered from syphilis himself and may have infected his wife with the disease. In her book, *House of Dreams: The Bingham Family of Louisville*, *Vanity Fair* journalist Marie Brenner suggests morphine use, coupled with Kenan Flagler's alcoholism may have contributed to her ill health. The source of the accusations of foul play lie in Bingham's handling of whatever malady afflicted Kenan Flagler. As Brenner observes, "there were sanatoriums all over the South for problem drinkers Furthermore, Mary Lily's immense fortune could have brought any specialist to Louisville." Yet, instead of seeking treatment or the assistance of qualified health professionals, Bingham put his wife in the care of his dermatologist. In his book, *The Bingham of Louisville: The Dark History Behind One of America's Great Fortunes*, David Leon Chandler exploits this decision to spin a false, sensational and slanderous work of historical fiction. In it, Chandler portrays Bingham as a philandering, greedy, drunkard who along with Ravitch incapacitated Kenan Flagler

⁶⁴ "Seek Bingham Case Transfer," *Courier-Journal*, October 7, 1917; "Four to Get Bulk of Flagler Fortune," *The New York Times*, October 25, 1917.

with drugs and forced her to sign the change in her will, mirroring some suspicions and accusations of the Kenans in the summer and fall of 1917. Along with the fair portrayal by Tift and Jones, William E. Ellis, in his book *Robert W. Bingham and the Southern Mystique*, rises to the defense of the elder Bingham. Benefitting from the wealth of material gathered by Barry Bingham for defense against the wave of authors taking artistic license with his father's story, Ellis, Tift and Jones cite from Young's notes and the Johns Hopkins memorandum, thus clearing Robert W. Bingham of any wrong doing.⁶⁵

Regardless of innocence, guilt or misbehavior, the \$5 million inheritance from Flagler provided Bingham with the means to purchase the *Courier-Journal* and *The Louisville Times*. In the spring of 1918, Arthur Krock, then editorial manager of the two papers, tipped off a melancholy Bingham to their sale in an encounter at the Pendennis Club. The children of publisher, Walter Haldeman along with the venerable editor, Henry Watterson were squabbling in court over ownership of the two newspapers. With the First World War ravaging Europe, publisher Bruce Haldeman's decision to censor Watterson's anti-German editorials for fear of affecting advertising revenues from Louisville's German businesses, started a war of its own. The differences between the contesting parties proved impossible to resolve and "weakened the operation – already

⁶⁵ Tift and Jones, *The Patriarch*, 50; Bingham, *Passion and Prejudice*, 133; Brenner, *House of Dreams*, 106-115. Brenner received access to the same files as Tift and Jones and although she never accuses Bingham of murdering Kenan Flagler, she remains skeptical of the validity of every piece of source material, steering her readers towards the belief that Bingham and Ravitch were responsible for the death. See David Leon Chandler, with Mary Voelz Chandler, *The Bingham's of Louisville: The Dark History Behind One of America's Great Fortunes* (New York: Crown Publishers, 1987), 121-123. In the summer of 1989, Samuel W. Thomas published an article that systematically deconstructs Chandler's research and distortive reporting methods which were first instigated by Barry Bingham, Sr. himself, who had Chandler dropped from his first publisher, Macmillan after citing approximately 230 errors in the novel's page proofs. See Samuel W. Thomas, "Let the Documents Speak: An Analysis of David Leon Chandler's Assessment of Robert Worth Bingham," *The Filson Club History Quarterly*, 63, no. 3 (July 1989), 307-361 as well as James J. Holmberg, "The Use of the Filson Club Manuscripts in 'The Bingham's of Louisville,'" *The Filson Club History Quarterly*, 63, no. 3 (July 1989), 362-385; Ellis, *Robert W. Bingham*, 60-61.

beset by an economic decline that was due in part to war-imposed shortages on pulp paper and manpower.” Krock decided a sale would be the quickest route to resolution. He approached Bingham because “he had been co-counsel to W.B. Haldeman, to [Bennett] Young (representing Isabel Haldeman), and to Watterson in the litigation initiated by Bruce Haldeman,” as well as being a Democrat, wealthy man, and a personal friend.⁶⁶ Bingham received a two-month option to acquire the papers. A purchase of controlling interest – 414 of 600 *Courier-Journal* shares and 708 of 1,000 *Louisville Times* shares -- occurred on August 6, costing Bingham \$1,057,328, placed him as owner of two newspapers that had frequently denounced him for his politics a decade earlier.⁶⁷

Bingham’s controversial trajectory is worth noting. His marriage to Kenan Flagler – and her subsequent death -- afforded him a life he could never have obtained on his own. It set in motion his acquisition of two of the most respected newspapers in the South, if not the country. The title of publisher provided the opportunity for public service in a way his political and legal careers failed to do and with it came respect, credibility and influence, all of which Bingham would use to his advantage. While never ruling out another run for political office and possessing a “genuine interest in improving

⁶⁶ Arthur Krock, *Memoirs; Sixty Years on the Firing Lines* (New York: Funk & Wagnalls, 1968), 42-48. Krock attributes Bingham’s melancholia to his rejection from military service in the war. Krock quotes the Judge admitting: “Abstention from [service] in wartime is alien to the tradition of my family. Also, I don’t know of anything useful to my country in its need that is available to me to do.” Bingham was rejected for being above the age acceptable for active duty. Recruiting Station US Army, 640 W. Jefferson St. Louisville, KY to RWB, April 26, 1917, George Barry Bingham Papers. 1861-1989; RWB Correspondence and Misc. Folder 1094 Filson Historical Society, Louisville, KY.

⁶⁷ Ellis, *Robert W. Bingham and the Southern Mystique*, 65; *The New York Times* reported “the advancing age of the former owners” as the motivating factor behind the sale. “Watterson’s Hot Shot As Paper is Sold,” *The New York Times*, August 7, 1918; “*The Courier-Journal* and *The Louisville Times* Change Ownership; Robert W. Bingham’s Statement,” *Courier-Journal*, August 7, 1918; Thomas calculated Bingham’s purchasing price by noting an \$186,000 deposit into the National Bank of Kentucky on August 6 by Henry Watterson who owned 12.5% of the stock. On April 30, 1920, Bingham bought out the minority interest owned by Bruce Haldeman for a reported \$418,500, raising the total price for the two newspapers to \$1,475,828. Samuel W. Thomas, ed., *Barry Bingham: A Man of His Word* (Lexington: University Press of Kentucky, 1993), 206n.

the economy of his adopted state,” Bingham sought ways in which his newfound power could be used for good beyond the newspapers. One example was his involvement in the formation of two tobacco cooperatives in the early 1920s aimed at providing farmers fair pricing in the face of the domineering American Tobacco Trust. Those efforts resulted in contact with Bernard Baruch, who later defended Bingham’s appointment as Ambassador to Great Britain in Congress when the Kenan Flagler story threatened to derail his promotion.⁶⁸ With his family’s financial status secured, Bingham could also afford to entertain philanthropic ventures to further be of service to the public, the beginning of the noblesse oblige of the Bingham family in Louisville. One of those ventures, explained on a February afternoon almost sixty years later by his son Barry, was the construction of a radio station for the city of Louisville and the state of Kentucky.

⁶⁸ See William E. Ellis, “Robert Worth Bingham and the Crisis of Cooperative Marketing in the Twenties,” *Agricultural History*, 56, no. 1 (Jan. 1982), 99-103; Young Notes to Aleen Bingham, 3.

CHAPTER ONE

“GROPING IN THE DARK”

Barry Bingham, Sr. claimed not to know of “any specific influence” on his father in regards to investing in a radio station. Yet Robert W. Bingham knew he “wanted somebody who would have a real concept of what that station could mean in the way of service.”¹ In its application to early radio broadcasting the term service was a malleable concept; multi-definable in its execution and open to refinement by those who chose to enter into a field with no clear set of parameters, objections, or expectations. In addition, the station’s affiliation with the newspapers placed additional emphasis on continuing the papers’ civic-minded authority, as many publishers saw their papers as “the only interest,” within their communities, “that does crusade for and does concern itself in the public interest.”² Hidden between these issues lay unforeseen obstacles of expense, equipment, construction of facilities, the assembling of a competent staff, and recruitment of a talent pool for entertainment; all of this while facing the possibility of an indifferent public.

On the morning of May 3, 1922, issues of the *Courier-Journal* hit newsstands carrying a confident, front-page message of Bingham’s intent to build a radio station:

¹ Bingham interview.

² Michael Stamm, *Sound Business: Newspapers, Radio, and the Politics of New Media*, 15.

[The radio-telephone station] will mark another step in the progress of the community served by *The Courier-Journal* [sic] and *The Louisville Times*. From the days of the delivery of the news by post, through the era of the telegraph and the telephone and the wireless telegraph, they have endeavored to keep abreast and somewhat in advance of their times. Now that the radio telephone has knit the scattered communities of the world, the region served by these newspapers is to be made the center of this new and amazing scientific development.³

All of the uncertainties about the medium, all of the responsibility of starting and running the radio station never entered Bingham's mind as an endeavor that would require his personal involvement or understanding. In addition to detailing the first years of radio station WHAS, this chapter will show that in fact, even as his statement went to print that morning, Bingham already had an individual in mind to see his vision into a reality, to weather the uncertainties of this new untested technology, and to transform it into cultural resource for the Louisville community and beyond. Just after the morning papers hit the newsstands, he placed a telephone call to arrange a meeting with a close friend. That friend was Credo Fitch Harris.⁴

Credo Harris

"Gracious in manner, cordial in speech, trim in appearance and a man's own man," Credo Fitch Harris knew very little, if anything, about radio. Born in 1874 in Jefferson County, Kentucky near Louisville, he attended Siglar's Preparatory School at Newburgh on the Hudson in New York and had a professional background in journalism.

³ "Judge Bingham Announces Radio Telephone Service," *Courier-Journal*, May 3, 1922.

⁴ Adding to the confusion of piecing together an accurate narrative, Credo Harris claims Bingham called him that morning. During the twentieth anniversary program however, an announcer claims that morning, Bingham dictated a letter to Harris which read: "I intend to erect a broadcasting plant that will carry religious consolation, entertainment and a wide knowledge of world affairs to Kentuckians and our Indiana neighbors. Especially to those unfortunates that are shut-in: the sick, the blind, the paralyzed. It must be a radio station which above all else is built on character and conducted with unvarying good taste. I am hoping you will direct it for me because we see eye to eye." "WHAS Twentieth Anniversary Show (1942)," www.lkyradio.com/WHASairchecks.htm. Accessed 9 November 2011. This is the only mention of this letter throughout all available sources and is not believed to exist.

In 1918, he served over six months as a Lieutenant of the Red Cross Division of the American Expeditionary Force in France during the First World War before he was wounded and sent home. As 1922 dawned, Harris was poised to enter a second decade of what was promising to be a modestly successful literary career. With five novels and a movie treatment already to his name, Harris was in the middle of completing yet another work when that May morning he received a phone call at his home from his friend, Robert W. Bingham.⁵ Announcing his intentions to build a radio-telephone broadcasting station, Bingham urged Harris to take control and oversee the project's completion and daily operation. Despite professing his ignorance on the subject of radio, Harris agreed to meet with Bingham later that afternoon to discuss the matter further. Upon his arrival, Bingham unveiled his aspirations to Harris in fuller detail:

It may be a divine miracle if handled properly. I intend getting one for Kentucky and Indiana, to give them pleasures, diversions, religious consolation, simple rules of hygiene – in fact all manner of enlightenment, especially to some parts of our mountains where a fine and forthright people are completely shut in.⁶

After half an hour of listening to Bingham's descriptions of radio's sensational abilities, Harris was spellbound. Skeptical that at best the job would last "perhaps a few months," he shelved the manuscript to his sixth novel.⁷ "Thus it was," Harris recalled fifteen years later, "that I stepped into the most exacting, maddening yet satisfying profession of the twentieth century."⁸

⁵ "Credo Harris," *Louisville Herald*, October 19, 1919; "Credo Harris, 1st Manager of WHAS and Key Man in Radio Rise, Dies," *Courier-Journal*, April 4, 1956; "Birthdays: Who's Who in State Biography," *Courier-Journal*, January 8, 1920; "Says Spirit of Americans Wonderful," *Louisville Herald*, July 10, 1918; Harris recalls that Bingham instructed Harris read his statement on the front page of the newspaper before coming in to see him.

⁶ Credo Fitch Harris, *Microphone Memoirs from the Horse and Buggy Days of Radio* (Indianapolis: The Bobbs-Merrill Co., 1937), 11-15.

⁷ "WHAS Headed by Novelist," *Courier-Journal*, March 12, 1933.

⁸ Harris, *Microphone Memoirs*, 15; "Author to Supervise C-J Radio Bulletins," *Courier-Journal*, May 11, 1922.

Barry Bingham, Sr. claims his father placed Harris in charge because he “knew that Mr. Harris had absolutely no technical knowledge at all of this medium,” however, he was “a man of considerable imagination,” possessing “an inquiring and inquisitive mind, and for that reason [Harris] was excited about going into a completely new medium and trying to see what could be done with it.”⁹ It was true that no matter how reluctant Harris claimed himself to be, or how much ignorance he possessed on the subject, he proved an ideal candidate for the job. Already a figure with some public stature as an author and a veteran, he brought name recognition to the station even if that recognition was just within Louisville. His lack of hesitancy to depart on such an endeavor at Bingham’s behest showed a hunger for new challenges and a devotion to those close to him. A 1919 *Louisville Herald* profile best summed up the man when it observed: “Ever-ready and willing to extend his ministrations -- does one need help in any undertaking whatsoever, up chirps this cheery volunteer to take a hand; he’s a perpetual answer to the help problem among his friends.”¹⁰ At his best, those who knew him described Harris as “a gentleman and a scholar,”¹¹ or at worst, a man who had “some strange ideas about him.”¹² Nevertheless, his curiosity, enthusiasm, ingenuity, and lack of experience enabled Harris to take an unscientific approach and ride the uncertain wave to starting and running a radio station.¹³

⁹ Bingham interview.

¹⁰ “Credo Harris,” *The Louisville Herald*, October 19, 1919.

¹¹ Geraldine Fox, interviewed by Terry L. Birdwistell, Louisville, Kentucky, October 31, 1979, History of Broadcasting in Kentucky Collection, Margaret I. King Library, University of Kentucky, Lexington, Kentucky.

¹² John Koch, interviewed by Terry L. Birdwistell, Louisville, Kentucky, October 18, 1979, History of Broadcasting in Kentucky Collection, Margaret I. King Library, University of Kentucky, Lexington, Kentucky.

¹³ In a February 1981 interview with Terry Birdwhistell, former federal radio inspector, Edwin A. Beane recalled his opinion of Credo Harris: “I thought he was a stuffed shirt.” Edwin A. Beane, interviewed by

Harris had his work cut out for him. In the spring of 1922, radio broadcasting was still a new, yet rapidly expanding technological field that captured the imagination of thousands of new listeners with each passing month. Although only three stations held federal licenses in September 1921, by July the next year, the Department of Commerce had issued 458 licenses. Aiding this boom was the turn of the century discovery that certain crystals – galena, silicon, iron pyrites, and perikon – could, “in some mysterious way, ‘detect’ radio waves, and transform them into electric current if touched in the right spot with a thin wire (or ‘cat’s whisker,’ as the amateur called it).”¹⁴ Now affordable, crystal detection took radio out of the hands of laboratory and military technicians and placed it in the home, where men and boys assembled a “motley array of electrical and metal castoffs – from curtain rods and bedposts to Model T ignition coils – into highly effective homemade sets.” Radio enthusiasts young and old vandalized telephone booths for their speakers and refashioned them into makeshift headsets. In their homes, attics, or garages, people transcended the monotony of their everyday lives by entering into a new world of static-filled voices and sounds, and they became hooked.¹⁵

The nation’s growing fascination for radio fed into the idealism figures such as Bingham possessed. It pervaded through the popular press. It was not uncommon in the decade of the 1920s to read multiple articles expressing the probability that radio would “affect the lives of people more intimately and change the currents of human activity more radically than the introduction of the locomotive, the harnessing of electricity, the

Terry L. Birdwistell, Washington D.C., February 16, 1981, History of Broadcasting in Kentucky Collection, Margaret I. King Library, University of Kentucky, Lexington, Kentucky.

¹⁴ Erik Barnouw, *A Tower in Babel*, 28-29.

¹⁵ Jome, *Economics of the Radio Industry*, 70; Susan J. Douglas, *Listening In: Radio and the American Imagination* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2004), 59.

telephone, automobile or the moving picture.”¹⁶ Radio would instill a “greater religious consciousness,” promote a “greater interest in politics” and education, and usher in the “dawn of mutual understanding and world peace.”¹⁷ While it seems unfair to place such pressure and expectation on one form of media, the newness and otherworldly quality of radio sealed its fate as such. And while station men and engineers shaped the format of radio, feeling their way through to an understanding of how and what to broadcast, their audience pushed them to go further as they themselves “had to learn how to listen, how they wanted to listen, and what they wanted to listen to.”¹⁸

To gain an understanding of the medium, Harris and J. Emmett Graft observed the inner-workings of *Detroit News*' 8MK, by then licensed through the Department of Commerce as Station WWJ. Next to KDKA in Pittsburgh, WWJ was one the oldest broadcasting stations in the United States and the *News*' ownership may explain why the two men from Louisville traveled there. The trip must have been amusing, if not a little disheartening. *Detroit News*' publisher, William Scripps later admitted he viewed their original crude transmitter as nothing more than a toy, and that their first broadcasts consisted of mounting “a phonograph in front of an ordinary telephone mouthpiece,” turning on the transmitter and hoping someone would be listening somewhere. Other descriptions also fail to flatter the *News*' early equipment, describing an antenna that did not work with its wire “tied to a rock five stories below” a window in the sports

¹⁶ “Radio’s Magic Wand,” *Outlook* (May 31, 1922), 218.

¹⁷ Marshal Buick, “The Limiting Social Effects of Radio Broadcasting,” *The American Journal of Sociology*, 32, no. 4 (January 1927), 617.

¹⁸ “Decided Change in Character of Radio Programmes,” *Courier-Journal*, July 14, 1922; Douglas, *Listening In*, 57.

department of the newspaper's office.¹⁹ Despite what they may have lacked, Detroit clearly affected Harris's outlook on the potential powers of radio. Upon returning home later that May, the *Courier-Journal* quoted Harris declaring: "The radio telephone is tremendously sublime." Echoing Bingham, he proclaimed: "[Radio] programmes [sic] will have a tremendous educational value. The little mountain school far from a railroad, its children restricted to a narrow routine, will be able at stated times to receive the best music, lectures and world information."²⁰ Reflecting back on that fateful first month, he later wrote: "Who, once yoked to this greatest of all humanitarian devices, having nursed it from infancy to the giant it has now become, could turn away?"²¹

The Staff

Hired on by Harris, Emmett Graft ran "the technical staff . . . a staff that consisted of one, himself," despite only a ninth-grade education. While garnering technical experience with radio as many men did, through the Navy in the First World War, Graft heard "some of the nation's pioneering radio stations in the East." Described as "a good engineer with his hands," Graft was "a very serious, very dedicated person," who displayed a readiness to "stay up all hours of the day and night to be sure the station stayed on the air." Dorothy Kirchhubel rounded out the skeletal staff. While looking for a new secretarial job within the newspaper offices, a friend recommended her to the new radio department of the *Courier-Journal*. Mirroring the initial expression of the man who

¹⁹ Reminiscences of William E. Scripps, May 1951, pp. 24-26, Radio Unit Project, Columbia Oral History Project, Butler Library, Columbia University, New York, NY; Bill Ladd, "Catwhiskers and Static," *Courier-Journal*, March 23, 1947.

²⁰ "First Programme of Radio Station May Be in June," *Courier-Journal*, May 24, 1922.

²¹ Harris, 16.

hired her, Kirchhubel asked, “What’s radio?”²² Barry Bingham remembered Harris being a father-type figure to his staff and the early station feeling more like a “family-type of enterprise.” Viewing the staff as his children, Harris embodied the role and became determined to “guide us along the right path.”²³

The Facilities

American Telephone and Telegraph’s manufacturing subsidiary, the Western Electric Company, was commissioned by the newspapers for the construction of their 500-watt 1-A transmitter. Fearful that the vibrations from the printing presses would do damage to the electrical equipment, engineers decided to house the facilities in the Fireproof Storage Company building. Designed in 1907 by architect Arthur Loomis in the American version of the Beaux-Arts style, the structure and property – acquired by Bingham in his purchase four years prior -- sat narrowly adjacent to the main building of the newspapers. The buildings were not connected. Access to the offices and studios required an elevator ride to an upper level of the newspaper building where outside a constructed iron platform led to a set of narrow stairs. Climbing the “dizzy height between the two buildings,” employees and visitors then passed through a fire door and entered the reception area.²⁴

²² Terry Birdwhistell, “WHAS Radio and the Development of Broadcasting in Kentucky, 1922-1942,” 336; Richard Weston, “The Man Who Turned On WHAS,” *Courier-Journal Sunday Magazine*, November 22, 1959, 43; A front page photo of the station's operating room shows that Graft had an assistant. His name was William Jarvis. Throughout Birdwhistell’s interviews, no one recognizes nor remembers Jarvis. It is unclear how long he was employed at the station. The next assistant hired was Fred Harlow. *Courier-Journal*, July 16, 1922; Joe C. Fox interview; Bingham interview; Dorothy Kirchhubel, interviewed by Terry L. Birdwhistell, Louisville, Kentucky, February 18, 1980, History of Broadcasting in Kentucky Collection, Margaret I. King Library, University of Kentucky, Lexington, Kentucky. Kirchhubel goes on to explain her friend answered her inquiry as, “Music in the air.”

²³ Bingham interview.

²⁴ Larry R. Baysinger, “65 Years of Service . . . The History of WHAS,” No Date, (WHAS Archival File, Louisville, KY), 1. A former WHAS engineer, Baysinger composed a four-page history of the station replete with technical information that is essential. It was found in a small archival folder of clippings and photographs located at the Louisville branch of Clear Channel Communications, Inc. at 4000 Radio Drive,

The transmitter was the most powerful commercially available and carried with it a price tag of \$10,500. Newspaper stations such as *Detroit News*' WWJ and WDAF of the *Kansas City Star* became users. Contained in a "large black steel cabinet weighing a ton," it housed four 250-watt and one 50-watt vacuum tubes necessary for generating the 500-watts of power. The antenna relay sat on its top. Spanning across the roofs of both the former U.S. Customhouse and Post Office that housed the newspapers and the Storage building were two sixty-foot towers. "The antenna was of the inverted 'L' configuration," writes Larry Baysinger, former assistant chief engineer at WHAS, "and consisted of four horizontal wires spaced six-feet apart and a 75-foot vertical down-lead – all of seven-strand number 20 phosphor bronze wire." To form an artificial ground, "a grid of 16 wires crossing 14 wires" lay at the base of the antennae creating a pattern of six-foot squares covering a surface area of 95 by 85 feet.²⁵ The engineers of Western Electric expressed confidence that in optimal conditions, the station would be heard upwards of 1,000 miles away.²⁶

Inside of the building were five rooms. Designed by the architectural firm of Nevin, Wischmeyer & Morgan, the reception room boasted of "wrought iron chandeliers trimmed in bronze," with two-tone French gray walls, mahogany woodwork and Windsor chairs upholstered in cretonne, while taupe Breton Wilton carpet covered the floors of every room, "assuring noiselessness and adding to the attractiveness of the ensemble."

Louisville, Kentucky; Mary Jean Kinsman and Marty Poynter Hedgepath, *National Historic Register*, January 24, 1980; Harris, 35.

²⁵ Birdwhistell, "WHAS Radio," 335; Harris, 35; William Peck Banning, *Commercial Broadcasting Pioneer*, 74. In a bulletin entitled "Radio Telephone Broadcasting," the Western Electric Company estimated that installing a transmitter and renovating a room to have "proper acoustic qualities," could run in excess of \$15,000; "Mystery Boxes Put Words in the Air," *Courier-Journal* July 18, 1922; Baysinger, "65 Years of Service," 1.

²⁶ "Times and C-J Radio Almost Ready to Test," *The Louisville Times*, July 14, 1922; "Antennae Raised to Broadcast C-J Concerts and News," *Courier-Journal*, July 15, 1922.

To the right was the operator's room. Measuring eight feet by fifteen feet, it housed "the radio transmitter, the power panel, input amplifier and monitoring receiver, the antenna relay control and the radio receiving devices." Access to Harris's office was straight ahead and the studio just beyond that. The studio had apple-green walls and housed a microphone, a player piano, an Estey stadium organ, and a baby grand piano "selected because it gives better results than a concert grand as it has less overtones." The soundproofing method was as follows: "From the masonry wall there is an air cushion an inch in width. After this was placed a special sound proof felt two inches thick followed by another inch of air space. Then a special coating of cloth was placed." With the windows covered over, it reminded visitors of a padded cell more suitable for an asylum. This construction reflected the latest advancement in soundproofing design as cushioned paneling began replacing the curtained walls and ceilings of studios such as WJZ in Newark and WLAP in Louisville. Past efforts to cut down on acoustical reverberation resulted in the "cloak room" soundproofing method which called for draping heavy fabric along the walls and ceiling until the room resembled a cloaked room or tent. Having no air conditioning, a fan was installed in the studio, designed to "change the air in the entire space in one minute and forty seconds."²⁷

Past employees remember the early equipment and facilities of the station in much more unflattering fashion than described in the glowing newspaper articles. Despite being state-of-the-art, Engineer Carl Nielsen referred to the original transmitter as "junk":

²⁷ "How Radio Station is Arranged," *Courier-Journal*, July 18, 1922; Harris, 36; Erik Barnouw, *A Tower in Babel*, 85; Baysinger, 1; Emily Thompson. *The Soundscape of Modernity: Architectural Acoustics and the Culture of Listening in America, 1900-1933* (Cambridge: The MIT Press, 2002), 264-265; "WHAS Has High Rank as Broadcasting Station," *The Louisville Times*, July 18, 1922.

It was very difficult to keep it operating. It ran on a stack of . . . X-sized batteries that were about twelve-by-twelve inches by eighteen inches high. . . . We had to maintain those . . . they were glass-cased. Then we had rotating generators for the high-voltage, and those were a problem keeping the commentators clean and keeping it operating and keeping it from blowing circuit breakers and fuses and all the rest of it.²⁸

Dorothy Kirchhubel described the station as a “zoo”; Credo Harris, a “three-ring circus.”²⁹ Barry Bingham described the facilities as not unlike a “very small beehive. There was a lot of activity in a very small space. . . . The quarters were grossly inadequate, even at the time. And of course they were not air-conditioned.”³⁰

With construction under way, the Department of Commerce issued a Class 1 license and the call letters W-H-A-S to Harris on July 13, 1922. Listed as Station no. 539, WHAS received approval to operate on 500-watts power and to broadcast programs at 360 meters and weather reports at 485 meters. Asking what the call letters stood for and the reason for broadcasting at “360 meters for programs and 485 for weather,” a clerk informed Harris: “I suppose you'll just have to work it out for yourself. I'm just reading it off your license.” Across the country, all licensed stations broadcast from the same frequency which was beginning to wreak havoc in the ether and frustrate listeners. Harris claimed WHAS “retained an accuracy of five to ten meters, above or under par,” when transmitting due to a government inspector who used pencil to make markings for frequency settings on the station's transmitting apparatus. Even if his markings survived when he returned for his next inspection, he rubbed them out, measured again and 360 and 485 received new positions upon the transmitter's frequency knob. Early in the

²⁸ Carl Nielsen, interviewed by Terry L. Birdwistell, Louisville, KY, October 30, 1979, History of Broadcasting in Kentucky Collection, Margaret I. King Library, University of Kentucky, Lexington, KY.

²⁹ Kirchhubel interview.

³⁰ Bingham interview.

decade such inaccuracies may have allowed WHAS and other stations to thrive without interference although for listeners, tuning in required constant fiddling and extreme patience.³¹

Newspaper Promotion

The *Courier-Journal* and *The Louisville Times* did their part to generate publicity and enthusiasm among their readers. “Whether the home be hidden in one of the river valleys, a day’s journey from a railroad station, or on a mountain pinnacle the ether waves will carry to it the world’s latest, whether in news, music or lectures,” one article bragged.³² Reasoning existed behind the braggadocio: the newspapers’ livelihood was linked to the success of the radio station. While Robert Bingham’s intentions were philanthropic, he was still a businessman. Both Barry Bingham Sr. and Credo Harris acknowledged that while the elder Bingham certainly intended the radio station to be a tool of public service its other main intention was to increase the circulation of his newspapers. Evidence of this is found throughout the *Courier-Journal* in the weeks preceding and following the station’s debut. Quarter, half, and full-page advertisements announced free radios for any individual who secured three or twelve six-month subscriptions to the morning *Courier*. Extensive coverage of station tests added to the excitement with boasts of it being “a model for broadcasting;” “the most powerful of its kind,” and how it “may be picked up by receivers 2,000 to 3,000 miles distant.”³³ Local

³¹ “WHAS is Code for C-J Radio Broadcaster,” *Courier-Journal*, July 14, 1922; Birdwhistell, “WHAS Radio,” 336; Harris, *Microphone Memoirs*, 22-28.

³² “WHAS is Code for C-J Radio Broadcaster,” *Courier-Journal*, July 13, 1922.

³³ Thomas ed., *Barry Bingham*, 55; Harris, *Microphone Memoirs*, 16; See *Courier-Journal*, July 15, 1922 for an example. For twelve six-month subscriptions the paper gave away a Westinghouse Aeriola Junior which included a Brandes Double Head Set. A Mengel’s Etherion local radio receiving set was given away for three six-month subscriptions. The ads continued for the next 10 days; “WHAS to Broadcast First Programme Tonight,” *Courier-Journal*, July 18, 1922; “Further Test Extend Rang of C-J Broadcaster,” *Ibid.*, July 17, 1922.

listeners who caught the phonograph tests by Western Electric engineers contacted the station to report on reception and express their excitement and gratitude. Cave City, KY resident, C.W. Williams telephoned the station to say “he had received the signals clearer than ever before.”³⁴ Bingham's hope for increases in newspaper sales showed foresight and an emerging belief among publishers concerning the impact of radio broadcasting. They proved accurate in their anticipation of the widespread popularity and importance of the medium however, they shared in the naiveté that radio's burgeoning popularity would not usurp their main business interest: the newspapers.

Print media -- its monopoly over the distribution of information more than a century long -- possessed a keen interest in radio's development. Threatened for the first time in their history, newspapers came face to face with a new medium capable of overtaking their position as the nation's source for news and information. Instead of waging war on radio, newspaper publishers sought to maintain their position by entering into station ownership themselves. Erik Barnouw notes that, “in May, 1922, eleven newspapers owned radio stations; by the end of the year there were sixty-nine.”³⁵ “Through radio,” observed Michael Stamm, “a newspaper owner such as Gannett quickly found a way to promote his firm as a modern, forward-looking corporation with a presence in multiple media.”³⁶ In an address read on air to listeners, Robert Bingham embodied this sentiment:

³⁴ “C-J Broadcaster is Given Test as Hundreds in 2 States ‘Listen In,’ *Courier-Journal*, July 16, 1922.

³⁵ Barnouw, 99. “By 1935, newspapers owned 20 percent of American radio stations, and by 1940 they owned 30 percent of the stations on the air, including some of the most powerful and important stations in the country.” Michael Stamm, “The Sound of Print: Newspapers and the Public Promotion of Early Radio Broadcasting in the United States,” in *Sound in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction*, ed. David Suisman and Susan Strasser (Philadelphia: The University of Pennsylvania Press, 2010), 223.

³⁶ Michael Stamm. “Newspapers, Radio, and the Business of Media in the United States.” *OAH Magazine of History*, 24, Issue 2 (January 2010), 26.

The *Courier-Journal* and its later-born associate, *The Louisville Times*, have kept pace with progress in the machinery of communications. . . . Now, tonight, we inaugurate this necromancy of the electric air, the radio. Hereafter, these newspapers and the public they serve will be knit by an aerial bond of incredible swiftness along which the human voice will pass with more speed than the speed of thought. An instant after we know what is important or interesting, you unseen thousands out there in the ether will know it also.³⁷

Stations petitioned call letters from the Department of Commerce to serve as acronyms. For example: WTMJ were the call letters for *The Milwaukee Journal*; KRNR was the small *Rosenburg News Review* station in Oregon. Newspaper tycoon William Randolph Hearst sought to acquire a radio station for every city he owned a newspaper in. Smaller papers such as the *South Bend Tribune* and the *Rochester Times-Union* joined the race to have their own broadcasting stations.³⁸ In many ways, newspapers – successful newspapers – provided the sound financial backing radio required to prosper. Stations sprang up in department stores, universities, churches, and garages, yet no one understood how much operating costs would be. WWJ cost \$3606 to operate in its first year, \$5760 in its second. By 1922, its operating costs skyrocketed to \$80,000. With no advertising revenue, only corporations such as RCA, Westinghouse, AT&T, or established newspapers the likes of the *Courier-Journal*, *The Chicago Tribune* and the *Atlanta Journal* could afford such a sum.³⁹

An interesting exchange uncovered in the Filson Historical Society highlights Bingham's emphasis on the importance of his newspapers versus the radio station and how the high cost of broadcasting had colored his opinion somewhat on the matter. In a letter to Bingham, dated December 5, 1930, Victor Hanson, publisher of *The Birmingham*

³⁷ "Text of Judge Bingham's Address," *Courier-Journal*, July 19, 1922. The address was read on air for WHAS' debut. Bingham was not in attendance.

³⁸ Stamm, "The Sound of Print," 224; Stamm, "Newspapers, Radio," 25.

³⁹ Barnouw, 105.

News and *The Birmingham Age-Herald*, wrote for advice concerning a radio station he had been “importuned to take over.” Admitting his ignorance on the subject, Hanson sought guidance by requesting information from Bingham regarding WHAS through seven detailed questions about operating costs, advertising income and its potential conflicts with the *Courier* and the *Times*. The most appealing are questions four through six:

4. Are you in a better position, speaking from a standpoint solely of a newspaper publisher, by owning and operating a radio station than you would be if you did not?

5. If you were not in the radio field, would you be inclined to go into broadcasting?

6. What is your best advice to me, in confidence, as to the course to pursue, from the standpoint of expense and from the standpoint of protecting my newspaper investment?⁴⁰

Bingham proves evasive in some instances and blunt in others in his return letter the following month. Declining to “mention the figures showing the operating cost and income” of WHAS, Bingham alludes to its hefty expense by stating that “the income from the Radio Station falls short of meeting the expense of the operation.” “I cannot see,” Bingham replied, “that we are in any better position by the ownership and operation of a radio station.” Going further, he explains:

If I were not already in the radio field I would not be so inclined to go into broadcasting. Changes in broadcasting have been so rapid that it has been difficult and burdensome to keep pace. What is today considered a high power station may tomorrow be obsolete. Once in broadcasting you, of course, feel the necessity of being in the front rank or passing out of the picture.

⁴⁰ Victor Hanson to Robert W. Bingham, pp. 1, Dec. 5, 1930, Bingham, Robert Worth, 1871-1937, Additional Papers, 1790-1936, Folder 76, Filson Historical Society, Louisville, KY.

In closing, Bingham apologizes for the discouraging remarks but concedes “the subject of radio itself is an indefinite one. . . . We were groping in the dark when we started it,” he finishes, “and are largely in the same situation today.”⁴¹

Bingham does acknowledge that the “value there is in a radio station to a newspaper is in those indefinite things which we choose to call prestige and goodwill,” and that, “undoubtedly, there is a certain amount of goodwill accruing” from WHAS.⁴² But what is really telling with these letters is, first, Bingham’s admission that had he to do it all over, he never would have started a radio station because of its constant demand for reinvestment in the face of insubstantial returns. Yet despite the expense, he was aware that WHAS did indeed generate listener goodwill. His understanding of the impact and importance of the station to its many listeners satiated one aspect of his desire to provide a public service and as further reading will show, no matter his complaints over private correspondence, WHAS was never left wanting. Second, Bingham must have forwarded Hanson’s letter to Harris because enclosed within the letters is a memo drafted by Harris wherein he answers all of Hanson’s questions himself. The marked difference between Harris’s suggested and Bingham’s actual answers further shows Harris’s full conversion and commitment to radio. Whereas Bingham replied to Hanson’s fourth question stating the newspapers were in no better position operating a radio station, Harris recommended answering “affirmatively.” “More and more newspapers,” Harris stated, “are seeking radio stations.” He supplied Bingham with the statistic that the

⁴¹ Robert W. Bingham to Victor Hanson, pp. 1-2, January 2, 1931, Bingham, Robert Worth, 1871-1937, Additional Papers, 1790-1936, Folder 76, Filson Historical Society, Louisville, KY.

⁴² The term “goodwill” is written and spoken a great deal during broadcasting’s early period, especially by business and newspaper owners entering into the radio field. William Hedges of *The Chicago Daily News* station WMAQ called goodwill “that intangible, yet nevertheless invaluable asset.” Stamm, *Sound Business*, 37.

Federal Radio Commission turned down 42 applications from newspapers seeking broadcasting licenses in September 1930 due to congestion. For Hanson's fifth question on whether Bingham would enter the radio field had he not eight years prior, Harris offered a four word suggestion: "I would answer yes."⁴³

Opening Night

Opening night for WHAS, July 18, 1922, was an unnerving ordeal for Credo Harris. A film crew hovered closely throughout the afternoon and evening to document the inaugural broadcast. Adding to the crew members and their equipment were "newspaper photographers, executives, departmental heads, reporters and a few specially invited others," who, "were very much in the way, standing around with mouths more or less agape while cautiously refraining from coming into contact with any metal surface." All invited guests as well as musicians and singers were in place inside the studio a full half-hour before the debut. The lack of air conditioning combined with the lighting from the film crew made the room almost unbearable. In addition to managerial duties, securing a broadcast license, overseeing construction, and recruiting talent for programs, Harris was charged with being the station's announcer as well. He ran through his sign-on, opening statement and announcements as best he could while pausing to scold any individual who moved to wipe their brows or adjust for comfort explaining that such movements could be heard when the program began. Once on the air, listeners living more than one thousand miles away received encouragement to wire collect to the station if they picked up WHAS's signal. The room sat in silent anticipation observing the studio

⁴³ Robert W. Bingham to Victor Hanson, 1; Credo Harris Memo to Robert W. Bingham, pp. 1, No Date, Bingham, Robert Worth, 1871-1937, Additional Papers, 1790-1936, Folder 7g, Filson Historical Society, Louisville, KY.

clock's countdown to seven-thirty. Prepped for a glowing red light to signal the broadcast's beginning, an anonymous audible gasp emanated from the group at its illumination. Undeterred by the reaction, Harris swallowed hard and exclaimed, "This is WHAS, the radio-telephone broadcasting station of the *Courier-Journal* and *The Louisville Times* in Louisville, Kentucky!" And with those words, WHAS was on the air.⁴⁴

The program began with a reading of Bingham's address followed by local soprano, Helen Riddell, backed by a string quintet.⁴⁵ Musicians and soloists hesitated in their performances despite Harris's assurances as only the microphone and "the tiny red signal light" faced them. They fared better than their civic and political counterparts. As Harris introduced each notable individual expecting a small address or greeting upon their recognition, not one of them uttered a single word choosing instead to bow, "in the most approved drawing-room manner" before the microphone. The silence was deafening.⁴⁶

In the middle of the program, Mayor Huston Quin gave a prophetic address proclaiming:

This station enables Louisville to take her place with other forward looking cities where the advantages to be derived from radio telephony have been realized. Voyagers on the high seas, passengers seated in comfortable couches on speeding limited trains, and travelers by airplane can now enjoy the programmes that are being broadcast daily by enterprising citizens and corporations.⁴⁷

⁴⁴ Harris, 48-49. Although this moment was not recorded, Credo Harris recorded his original sign-on for the station's twentieth anniversary. It can be heard by clicking on "WHAS 1922 Sign-On" at www.lkyradio.com/WHASairchecks.htm.

⁴⁵ "C-J Broadcaster is Given Test as Hundreds in Two States 'Listen In,' First Concert Scheduled Tuesday," *Courier Journal*, July 16, 1922.

⁴⁶ Harris, 50, "Radio 'Fans' Within 350-Mile Radius Hear First Programme Sent From WHAS Station," *Courier-Journal*, July 19, 1922.

⁴⁷ "Quin Uses Radio in Boosting City," *Courier-Journal*, July 19, 1922. It would be years before radio would be accessible to trains and airplanes.

The microphone, a “tiny, gunmetal box . . . slightly bigger than an alarm clock,” pushed the music and speeches out into the ether and into the radios of an estimated 10,000 listeners. Afterwards, the program’s participants attended a reception in the newspaper offices where more footage was shot to be edited into a film and shown in local movie theaters.⁴⁸

Listener Reaction

The broadcast proved a resounding success. A mobile radio unit installed on a truck, complete with antenna, amplifier and loudspeaker, began travelling to surrounding areas. Driven by H. W. Stodghill, circulation manager of the two newspapers, the truck, parked in Jeffersontown for the station's debut, met close to 200 enthusiastic local citizens.⁴⁹ During one such demonstration in Simpsonville, listeners gathered around the truck began crawling around the vehicle looking for evidence of wires or to see if “someone wasn’t underneath it working a phonograph.”⁵⁰ Phone calls poured in asking for encores; telegrams and letters from distant addresses flooded the station with expressions of gratitude. Retailers placed loudspeakers outside their storefronts that clogged up the streets with curious listeners. One man entertained an estimated 250 people within his neighborhood by rigging a loudspeaker to his receiving set.⁵¹ Almost

⁴⁸ “Radio ‘Fans’ Within 350-Mile Radius Hear First Programme . . .” *Courier-Journal*, July 19, 1922. On Friday, August 4, the *Courier* reported that the Alamo Theater would show a film entitled “WHAS Stars in Action” for a Sunday-to-Sunday run. “The picture was made for the benefit of the thousands of radio fans who have been unable to visit the station and its studio, and reveals the workings of a modern broadcasting station, behind the scenes.” “Movie to Show WHAS in Action,” *Courier-Journal*, August 4, 1922. No evidence of this film appears to have survived.

⁴⁹ “Jeffersontown Hears First Outdoor Concert by Radio,” *Courier-Journal*, July 19, 1922.

⁵⁰ “WHAS to Furnish Campers’ Music,” *Courier-Journal*, July 27, 1922. The mobile truck continued travelling across portions of Kentucky and Southern Indiana into the following year, giving countless thousands their first experience with radio. D.H. Fairley, who oversaw the tour, claimed 5,000 people gathered for a school rally in Brandenburg, Kentucky listened intently to an afternoon radio concert. A great majority remained for the station’s evening concert and “applauded as though the artists were facing them.” “C-J Radio Truck Entertains 500,000 in Tour of 27 Counties,” *Courier-Journal*, January 28, 1923.

⁵¹ “Thousands in 2 States Hear Radio Concert,” *Courier-Journal*, July 20, 1922.

5,000 people listened over the following weekend through a receiving set installed at the Civic Club Carnival in Portland, a neighborhood in the western section of Louisville. Another 5,000 clogged the streets of New Albany, across the Ohio River in Indiana, to hear “a fellow-townsmen’s five-minute address on ‘Loyalty.’” In less than a week, radio had cast its spell on Louisville.⁵²

Radio in Print

The *Courier-Journal* and *The Louisville Times* began setting more space aside for radio news. The *Courier's* “Radio in the Home” column, written by Henry M. Neely, fed the amateur enthusiast’s curiosity by focusing on home construction of radios, with an emphasis on various equipment and illustrated set-up techniques. Similar columns ran in the *New York Evening World* and *New York Evening Mail*. Neely’s column ran for several months before and after the station's debut, when manufactured radio sets began to appear with more frequency and “emphasis gradually shifted from technical to program matters.”⁵³ Sunday issues had an entire page devoted to national and international radio news.⁵⁴ Curious listeners and station fans could find a schedule of WHAS' programs printed daily within the pages of the *Courier*. Other newspaper stations devoted pages to all things radio. The *Detroit News* started its first radio column on December 19, 1920. The *New York Globe* created an entire radio supplement that was overseen by Everett L. Bragdon, who got his start at *Popular Science Monthly*. In 1922, Orrin E. Dunlap, Jr. created a radio section for *The New York Times*, overseeing and directing coverage until 1940 when he accepted a position within the Radio Corporation

⁵² “WHAS is Headliner at Portland Carnival,” *Courier-Journal*, July 21, 1922; “School’s need of Radio Told to Normal Pupils,” *Courier Journal*, July 25, 1922.

⁵³ See *Courier-Journal*, July 11, 1922 for an example; Barnouw, 98.

⁵⁴ See *Courier-Journal*, July 16, 1922 for an example.

of America. Many papers followed suit while others had men working in radio who then reported the past night's programming in next morning's paper. Papers also took steps to publish the names and addresses of those who wrote or phoned in to advertise "audience enthusiasm," and to encourage continuous praise through "payoffs in print." The Louisville newspapers continued this trend.⁵⁵

In addition to these efforts, on the sixth of August the newspapers reported they would "institute a free radio school to instruct children and adults in practical radio subjects." Established "to fill the wants of thousands who have not had the opportunity to obtain practical knowledge of the rapidly growing science," instructors would teach basic principle applications, focusing less on "the theoretical side of the new science."⁵⁶ At the request of R.A. Carter, secretary of the Louisville Urban League, WHAS established a "negro radio school" as well.⁵⁷

Susan Douglas explains the rationale behind WHAS's motivation to establish a radio school:

People didn't just walk into a shop in 1922, buy a radio, bring it home, plug it in, and hear orchestral music. That wouldn't be possible until the late 1920s at the earliest. Everyday people had to assemble the device (which included stringing up an antenna)⁵⁸

The technology and construction of early crystal radios was so rudimentary that failing to get reception by moving the wire to another portion of the crystal, WHAS recommended rubbing alcohol on the crystal itself or baking it in an oven for ten

⁵⁵ Barnouw, 98-99; 131-132. "Orrin Dunlap, Jr. Radio Authority," *The New York Times*, February 2, 1970, 33; "Named to RCA Post," *The New York Times*, September 16, 1940, 17.

⁵⁶ "Free Radio School to be Established by C-J and *The Times*," *Courier-Journal*, August 6, 1922. Classes were held in Room 210 of the newspapers' building. Neely's "Radio in the Home" column within the *Courier* was a natural extension of these courses.

⁵⁷ "C-J and *Times* Plan Negro Radio School," *Courier-Journal*, August 19, 1922.

⁵⁸ Susan J. Douglas, *Listening In*, 57.

minutes.⁵⁹ Loudspeakers were prohibitively expensive; therefore, listeners would have to connect themselves “umbilically by headphones to small black boxes powered by sets of batteries.” Those with better financial means, “had sets with tuning dials – five of them – all of which had to be perfectly calibrated to reel in particular stations.”⁶⁰ All who attended WHAS’s radio school, “held in Room 210 of the *Courier-Journal* and *The Louisville Times* building” received an opportunity to tour the station’s facilities.

Listeners Respond

Meanwhile, WHAS listeners began responding from farther and farther distances. In addition to receiving messages from states such as Maryland, New York and Florida, John E. Hayne wired the message, “Received here. Modulation good, fairly loud, using one amplifier.” He lived in Sarnia, Ontario, Canada.⁶¹ “It may be of interest to you to know,” wrote Joseph C. Doughty, “that having installed a receiving set aboard a fishing dory, your concerts were received quite clearly while we were cruising in the Atlantic Ocean about thirty miles off New Jersey coast.”⁶² A Louisville attorney vacationing aboard a cruise ship near Bermuda picked up WHAS loud and clear.⁶³ The predictions of Western Electric’s engineers’ proved to be true. By 1925, WHAS’s signal reached Los Andes, Chile and in November of that year, the station could include London, England among its listeners.⁶⁴

However, not all messages the station received were positive. While celebrated by the majority of the population who had access to radio, the new technology stirred up

⁵⁹ Harris, 47.

⁶⁰ Douglas, 55.

⁶¹ “Putting Louisville on the Map,” *The Louisville Times*, July 22, 1922.

⁶² “WHAS Reaches Atlantic Ocean,” *Courier-Journal*, August 5, 1922.

⁶³ “Tourist Near Bermuda Hears WHAS Radio Programme Clear as a Bell,” *Courier-Journal*, August 12, 1922.

⁶⁴ “Radio Station at Louisville Honors Song,” *Christian Science Monitor*, December 19, 1925.

confusion, anxiety, and fear in others. Amidst numerous congratulatory letters and telegrams were messages wrought with paranoia, accusations and conspiracy. As another of his numerous responsibilities, Credo Harris had the pleasure of reading a great deal of the daily mail and wires addressed to WHAS. One woman claimed radio was making her daughter sick while another attested that radio signals, received through the metal coils in her mattress, prevented her from sleeping at night. Quick-witted landlords told their tenants that radio waves caused their creaky floorboards; a farmer, watching a bird drop dead out of the sky, was sure radio was to blame, as was a gentleman who complained that “radio-induced” lightning knocked bricks off of his chimney. An elderly woman swore to Harris she saw an apparition of her dead husband one evening while listening to WHAS and she begged -- in person -- for the station to repeat its program so she could see him once again. Surpassing the lunacy of these pleas and complaints were listeners who concluded “voices had been wandering around in space for centuries, actually present but inaudible,” and now “radio opened the way to capture and bring them alive.” One reader asked: “What is to hinder your station from letting us hear the Sermon on the Mount, in the very voice of Christ, Himself?”⁶⁵

Such reactions to radio were not indicative of the average regional listener’s intelligence; many across the country did not understand the technology. Even *The New York Times* asked: “If wireless waves travel around the world about eight times per second, why do we not hear the music more than once? What finally becomes of the waves?” Such notable figures as Sir Arthur Conan Doyle and physicist Sir Oliver Lodge put their reputations on the line as they proclaimed, unabashed, in the press that the

⁶⁵ Harris, 99-105.

spirits of the dead lay in the mysterious medium thought responsible for radio transmission: the ether. “[The dead] have transmitters in the line of ether,” Doyle stated, “All we have to have is the receiver.” Besides his other, more useful work in the study of radio, Lodge conducted experiments into radio telepathy, or the reception of “thought waves.”⁶⁶ Such questions, outlandish statements, and experiments quelled in the face of broadcasting’s proliferation and Harris, for one, was relieved. Assuring listeners that radio was incapable of the supernatural and not responsible for “rain, earthquakes, tornadoes, and such-like phenomena of nature,” was one duty within the station he was happy to relinquish.⁶⁷

And yet, Harris confronted another unforeseen consequence of broadcasting when letters of adoration began pouring in from female listeners. Radio announcers, whether they gave their name on air or remained anonymous, became recognizable to their listeners. Newark station WJZ combatted the possibilities of their announcers becoming “unmanageable celebrities,” by giving all their on-air personalities sets of initials. The practice continued through 1925. An announcer, Harris observed, “gathers an army of friends who do not, nor shall they ever, know him by sight. They have guessed what he looks like, yet he is a hundred types to a hundred imaginations.”⁶⁸ “Radio in those days,” Barry Bingham remembered, “was the beginning of these crushes that people got on performers. . . . In those days somebody who performed on the radio was considered almost automatically a sort of glamorous person.” Continuing, he explained:

⁶⁶ “Radio Mystery of the Ether Puzzles Experts,” *The New York Times*, June 24, 1923, 21; “Doyle Says Ghosts May Use Radio,” *The New York Times*, May 5, 1922, 6; “Mind Reading by Radio is Tested in Britain,” *The New York Times*, February 17, 1927, 6.

⁶⁷ *Courier-Journal*, June 26, 1947.

⁶⁸ Barnouw, 163; Harris, 85. One letter from a young girl in Ohio read: “Won’t you please [underscored] send me immediately [underscored] a photograph of your announcer! I know exactly [underscored] what he looks like! Isn’t he tall, with perfectly lovely [twice underscored] blue eyes and wavy hair? I’m simply mad [underscored] about the way he says ‘goodnight!’” Harris, 85-86.

Personalities were developed in that way, and people got to feel that they knew them, even though they had never met them in their lives. They would write to them and call them up. There was an intimacy about it that nobody had ever experienced before, you see. You didn't get it, of course, by going out to the movies. Here was the first time you would have an attractive entertainer coming into your room and singing to you, almost that way.⁶⁹

Letters arrived possessing a feminine “fire and fervor” unknown to Harris leaving him “bewildered and helpless.” As he never gave his name over the air, all letters came addressed to “Announcer,” and being both nameless and faceless added to the mystery, excitement and attraction of his fans. If one letter “spoke of passions: ruling, master, everlasting,” others fantasized of a tryst with dates, times and locations written in explicit detail. The undue attention so rattled Harris that to absolve himself of the guilt these letters engendered, he turned them over to his wife, levelheaded enough to “see the pathos in them.” To combat this new fascination, Harris started issuing a standard letter to inquiring female listeners:

Dear Madam:

It is against the rules of this radio station to divulge the name of our announcer. With deep regret, I am —⁷⁰

Early Programming

With WHAS reaching more listeners every day, the pressing issue became programming. Although granted unlimited time as stipulated in their license, WHAS began daily broadcasts from 4:00 – 5:00pm, and 7:30 to 9:00pm. Local musicians, performing for free in exchange for publicity, formed the majority of the schedule. Instrumental and vocal music broadcasts ranged from classical and religious to hillbilly and jazz, one of the more popular genres although despised by Harris. “No [jazz]

⁶⁹ Thomas, ed. *Barry Bingham*, 57-58.

⁷⁰ Harris, 115-117; 86.

selections would have been considered beautifully finished without the introduction of a crowing rooster, a squealing pig, [or] a cow bell,” he later commented.⁷¹ His was not a unique way of thinking. At that time, negative reactions to jazz stemmed from “deeply rooted racism” pervasive throughout the country which “awoke troubling notions of uncontrolled, barbaric masses disporting themselves without discipline or restraint.”⁷² In fact, in 1922 the Ninth National Recreation Congress publicly equated jazz drumming to the savageness of “African voodoo” worshipping and University of Wisconsin professor Peter Dykeman proclaimed, “As a nation, we are consuming an unpalatable and decidedly unbalanced musical ration.”⁷³ As an act of diversion meant to prevent listener protests over content, Credo Harris refrained from revealing the titles of classical works when performed, until the pieces’ concluded.⁷⁴ Trends proved hard to combat and jazz found its place on WHAS and other stations although in the safer big-band incarnations made popular by white bandleaders and composers.⁷⁵ Even with such a short daily broadcast period, it was evident that WHAS would have to supplement their music programming with other material in order to present a service to the public more in line with Bingham’s vision for the station.

Harris took the challenge of diversifying the program schedule seriously. More so than that, he realized the power of the spoken word and the microphone’s ability to convey influential thoughts into the minds of listeners. With no censorship and

⁷¹ Harris, 24-25; 66.

⁷² Hilmes, ed., *Only Connect*, 29.

⁷³ “More Uses For Jazz Than Dancing: Insanity and Movie Actors Controlled By Rhythm,” *Courier-Journal*, December 3, 1922.

⁷⁴ Ladd, “Catwhiskers and Static.”

⁷⁵ It should be noted that the statement concerning Harris’s dislike of jazz is in no way implying that Harris himself was racist. The early development of jazz and radio are intertwined and therefore the mention of one requires some mention of the other. Harris’s racial views, whatever they may have been, are irrelevant.

regulation set in place, the station had a moral obligation to hold itself to a higher mode of conduct. With that in mind, Harris composed The WHAS Code:

A station's value is in proportion to the esteem of its listeners.
One objectionable word will ruin the most beautiful program ever built.
Had the Lord written an Eleventh Commandment it might have been:
Thou Shalt Not Be Common.
Entertainment, if not in good taste, belies its name.
Mispronunciation is worse than no pronunciation.
Avoid controversies.

While the years passed and the technology and programming improved, Harris never relinquished this view and took lengths to make sure the men and women who took his place in front of the microphone knew it. A memo drafted in April of 1931 asked that "the Announcing Staff please tighten up on our well established rule against ad libitum address to the microphone," as "some recent instances of conversational patter . . . has transgressed our conception of good taste." If the station failed to use "decent and intelligent address" while broadcasting, it was Harris's opinion, that silence became a virtue.⁷⁶

Taking direction from the *Atlanta Journal's* WSB, Harris's first programming decision offered Sundays to a rotating cast of Louisville-area ministers from all denominations which met with overwhelming enthusiasm from area listeners. Viewed as an "excellent plan or way by which the back-slider can be reached," weekly Louisville newspaper, *Civic Opinion*, opined that church services on the radio best illustrates to "Christian workers a new advantage in doing good."⁷⁷ A storekeeper purchased twenty crystal sets and earphones so people of his small town could hear the sermons. An early

⁷⁶ Harris, 63-65; WHAS Memo Dated April 27, 1931 (WHAS Archival File, Louisville, KY). Written in pencil on the top, left-hand corner is a request to have the memo added to the station's General Order's and Notices.

⁷⁷ "Judge Bingham a Missionary," *Civic Opinion*, October 14, 1922.

example of radio's unifying power, every week "a pastorless flock from within a radius of ten miles" ventured to George W. Cleveland's country store in Orangeville, Indiana, to listen while seated upon make-shift pews of egg crates. "When the radio minister said 'Let us pray,'" wrote Cleveland in a letter to the station, "men and women kneeled on the bare wood floor." Bedridden for eight years, eighty-five year old, Susan Heady, expressed tears of joy upon hearing the first sermon through a little crystal set at her bedside. A man from Middletown, Ohio reported a similar situation concerning his wife.⁷⁸

As more and more people listened in, demand for quality programming increased, pushing stations to explore any and all avenues to keep listeners tuned in. WHAS and other newspaper stations fought to stay at the forefront of this movement. Promoting many self-proclaimed "firsts" in broadcasting helped engender competition between newspaper stations, in turn fostering radio's growth. Success at broadcasting new programs and events meant an increase in the listening audience which would lead to increased readership of the papers; *The Chicago Tribune's* WGN began developing serial programming including *Amos n' Andy* and *Little Orphan Annie*. They spent in excess of one thousand dollars a day for access to a long distance phone line in order to broadcast the trial of John Scopes in Dayton, TN. WWJ claimed to possess the first radio orchestra as early as 1921.⁷⁹

As he proved with establishing the religious broadcasts on Sunday, Harris was adept at solving the programming dilemma. Driven by the inspiration to test the station's

⁷⁸ "Shepherded by Radio, Pastorless Flock Gathers at Country Store for Services," *Courier-Journal*, July 30, 1923; Harris, 52; 55; "Church Services Flashed to the Sick," *Courier-Journal*, July 24, 1922; "WHAS Sunday Services Bring Praise From Many, Pastor Says," *Courier-Journal*, October 1, 1922.

⁷⁹ Stamm, "The Sound of Print," 227-229; Barnouw, 196; Stamm, "Newspapers, Radio," 26.

equipment to its technological limits as much as following where his imagination and curiosity could lead him, Harris wasted no time steering WHAS into the great unknown of the burgeoning field. In September, 1922, the station's first successful remote broadcast occurred. An organ performance took place in the Alamo Theater a block up from the station at 444 South Fourth Street. A special wire carried the signal from the theater back to the studio.⁸⁰ The next feat came the following month when the *Courier* reported that WHAS would announce, play-by-play, the World Series between the New York Yankees and New York Giants. While sportswriter Grantland Rice commentated from the Polo Grounds press box over WJZ, WHAS set up a special telegraph line to receive news of the action. The telegraph operator dictated an entire inning's proceedings and passed them off to Harris who read them aloud on the air, down to every ball and strike. Two loudspeakers, placed on both the Third and Liberty Street sides of the newspaper building, projected the broadcasts out into the open city air encouraging passerby to come and enjoy the "next best thing to a grandstand seat." Bleachers set up on the sidewalks accompanied the large crowds. Children kept policemen busy by clogging the streets while re-enacting Harris's announcements. As evidenced by the impassioned bickering of fans standing outside the studios, as well as letters sent to the station, the broadcasts proved successful.⁸¹

⁸⁰ Nash, *Towers Over Kentucky*, 21; Harris, 128-129. Harris mentions WHAS may not be the first to do a remote broadcast. He claims General Electric's WGY, in Schenectady, NY may have been first; "Credo Harris, 1st Manager of WHAS and Key Man in Radio Rise, Dies," *Courier-Journal*, April 4, 1956; Harris, 231.

⁸¹ Harris, 129; "World Series Results Are to be Broadcast by C.J. Radiophone," *Courier-Journal*, October 1, 1922; Glenn Scott, "'Seeing' a World Series by Radio," *The Wireless Age*, 10, no. 2 (November 1922), 31; See Advertisement for Grandstand Seating, *Courier-Journal*, October 3, 1922; "Jocular Throng Listens as WHAS Broadcasts World's Series Game," *Courier-Journal*, October 5, 1922; "World's Series Today by WHAS," *Courier-Journal*, October 8, 1922.

Inspired through their observations of the interest generated by the World Series broadcasts, WHAS engineers proposed staging a “radiogame” at Parkway Field. The conception was to receive the play-by-play broadcast of the World Series, relay it to players positioned on a baseball diamond and have them pantomime the entire game in front of a local audience. Each respective team would dress in the uniforms of those they were portraying and umpires would be included to further add realism to the re-enactment. According to Harris it took two years of development to iron out the mechanical and electrical issues. The first demonstration took place at Parkway Field for the 1925 pennant between the Pittsburgh Pirates and Washington Senators. Each play was read in a timely fashion with space granted for their completion before reading another.

Batters and runners could not hear the plays, but were coached by players on the various bases, all of whom were equipped with earphones. All bases were wired together, and all connected to the press box microphone. Each player was equipped with a wire device by which he received each play as called. This equipment could be detached when his team came in to bat and handed to the opposing player taking the field. An electrician was kept on hand to examine the connections at the end of each inning and insure all players being ‘alive’ at all times.⁸²

WHAS patented the process and although bad weather prevented them from putting on a radiogame through much of the 1926 season, the World Series between the New York Yankees and St. Louis Cardinals went off without incident. While no evidence exists as to the cost of such an endeavor, admission was free for all to watch the seven games of the series. WHAS sought nothing in return for bringing the World Series to life in

⁸² “Mimic Ball Games Hold Crowds,” *Editor & Publisher*, October 17, 1925, 34; Remarkably, there is no evidence, documentary or photographic, to be found of this in the *Courier-Journal*.

Louisville, decades before television would.⁸³ Other sports successes were the play-by-play reporting of the famous Centre-Harvard football match broadcast a year after the actual match in 1922, as well as broadcasting the famous Jack Dempsey-Tommy Gibbons heavyweight boxing match from Shelby, Montana. Foreshadowing ideas to come, Harris tried convincing WSB to do a station duet. Over a long distance phone line, a violinist at WHAS would play along with a pianist at WSB. He never received a response.⁸⁴

Experimentation

WHAS's other major feats did not involve programming or broadcasting in general terms. Experimentation seemed to be another interest of Harris and his growing engineering staff. Barry Bingham recalls that Harris and the engineers "thought it was exciting to do new, and rather unusual, bizarre things" with WHAS and rather than stage "public relations" gimmicks, viewed experiments as "something unusual that they thought radio could do and they wanted to see if they could do it."⁸⁵ One such feat involved a natural wonder of Kentucky and instigated from a complaint issued by one listener ninety miles outside of Louisville. The station received a letter from a man who mounted a receiving set and aerial onto his truck "so that he could drive around the countryside giving demonstrations of this new art of radio." While doing so, he discovered several reception "dead spots" where the station signal disappeared. Harris and Graft sent Junior Operator Fred G. Harlow and an assistant, W.A. Mivelez to investigate the matter further. But the issue of reception dead spots gave Harris another

⁸³ See "C-J 'Radiogame' Will Reproduce World Series for Louisville Fans," *Courier-Journal*, October 5, 1926; "Cardinal's Victory Reproduced in 'Radiogame' at Field Here," *Courier-Journal*, October 6, 1926; "Fans at C-J 'Radiogame' Watch Babe Ruth Pound Out Home Runs," *Courier-Journal*, October 7, 1926; "Fans See Yanks Win 'Radiogame,'" *Courier-Journal*, October 8, 1926. There is no record of a radiogame after this year.

⁸⁴ "WHAS to Flash Big Fight News," *Courier-Journal*, July 4, 1923; Harris, 129; 231.

⁸⁵ Bingham interview.

idea and he posed a question to his engineers: Could radio signals be received underground? “At the time,” Harris explained, “there had been speculations expressed in a scientific radio magazine concerning an electromagnetic wave’s ability to penetrate earth but, no cavern being handy, field experiments lagged.” Mammoth Cave, 102 miles to the south of Louisville, proved an excellent spot to attempt a test. Harlow and Mivelez rerouted to Edmonson County. Armed with “one four-tube non-regenerative loop receiver” and an iron ground-spike, on the morning of July 22, 1923, Harlow, Mivelez, and a skeptical local guide, descended into the cavern.⁸⁶

Inspected the night before in their hotel room, just above the Rotunda of the cave where the first test would take place, the receiving equipment was in working order; the engineers picked up WHAS’s signal with little difficulty. Graft relayed the station’s broadcast schedule for the morning and afternoon, allowing Harlow to construct a timetable for attempts at signal reception. The next morning, while 360 feet below ground in the Rotunda, Harlow and Mivelez heard nothing. For ten minutes they tweaked and turned the dials on their receiving apparatus, much to the amusement of their guide. The two men looked over every aspect of their equipment for defects and concluded that the ground-spike for the aerial, driven into a “substance as dry as powder,” would need to penetrate an area with moisture. Unfamiliar with radio, their guide wound further into the cavern through the famed Corkscrew path down to Echo River, chiding them that

⁸⁶ Harris, 241-243; Larry R. Baysinger, “The Mammoth Cave Radio Test of July 21, 1923,” No Date (WHAS Archival File, Louisville, KY), 1; Fred G. Harlow, “Listening-in in Mammoth Cave,” *Radio Broadcast*, 4, no. 1 (January 1924), 17. Baysinger mistakenly reports that Graft and an assistant, Karl Schmidt investigated the dead spots and conducted the Mammoth Cave test, and that in addition to the guide, there was yet another person in their party present for the tests. Furthermore, his date for the test, July 21 is incorrect as well. All of this is puzzling due to Harlow’s article in *Radio Broadcast*, which Baysinger quotes from, and coverage by the *Courier*. See “Radio Science to be Forwarded by Mammoth Cave Experiment,” *Courier-Journal*, July 22, 1923 for a clear example of Harlow’s, not Graft’s, name as engineer.

perhaps they'd hear "the echoes of the Louisville band there." Lugging their equipment, they walked a slippery, treacherous mile in near darkness.⁸⁷

Their constant movement led to repeated missed opportunities for testing. Afloat on a skiff in Echo River, they had over half an hour to prepare before the next program. The spike was driven into the river bed at the appropriate time and yet nothing came through the headsets except the high, static whistle of the station's carrier wave. The cause for this bit of progress-masked-in-failure resulted from the insulating effect of the cavern's slickened ceiling and walls. Harlow and Mivelez informed their guide that they were now surrounded by too much moisture.⁸⁸ With the afternoon concert drawing near, Harlow knew their window of opportunity was closing. Leaving Echo River they began the arduous task of lugging their equipment back through the winding paths until they entered an area 370 feet below the surface approximately a mile from the cave's entrance. Their lamps revealed patches of moistened soil and dry surrounding walls. With the spike driven into the damp ground and turned in the direction of Louisville, Harlow and Mivelez tuned and waited. At four o'clock, Harris's afternoon sign-on came clearly through the headphones marking, as the *Courier-Journal* commemorated a year later, "The first time an attempt had been made to receive radio waves inside the cave and it proved the scientific fact that radio waves penetrate the ground."⁸⁹ Seeking vindication, Harlow placed his headset over the ears of the guide who screamed in horror as he

⁸⁷ Harlow, "Listening-in in Mammoth Cave," 19.

⁸⁸ *Ibid.*, 20. Baysinger claims the station broadcast for 15 minutes each hour that day beginning at 10:00am. At 4:00pm the station would begin its regularly scheduled hour-long afternoon concert. Harlow corroborates this in his article. Baysinger, "The Mammoth Cave Test," 1.

⁸⁹ "Early Attempts to Hear Radio un Mammoth Cave are Explained by Expert," *Courier-Journal* July 13, 1924;

slapped them from his ears. After his initial shock, Harlow and Mivelez watched with amusement as the guide listened speechless for the entirety of the hour-long program.⁹⁰

Further successes followed. In March of 1924, WHAS broadcast a conversation between Harris, silent-film actress Mary Pickford and her husband, Douglas Fairbanks. They discussed Pickford's upcoming film and her advice for any "ambitious aspirants for the screen" who were listening.⁹¹ In August that same year, WHAS broadcast a series of military drills by the Thirty-Eighth Division of the National Guard at what would become Fort Knox. As the division staged several imaginary invasion scenarios, with live ammunition, WHAS put "special war correspondents" on the ground and along with commentary by staff officer, Col. Mach E. Hamer, created a realistic military melodrama over the course of three evenings. A listener from Boston mistook the battle for signals from Mars, foreshadowing on a small scale the paranoia Orson Welles generated in the next decade with his "War of the Worlds" broadcast. Overall, listeners called and wrote in droves claiming, "The sounds of battle were unmistakable;" "When they heard officers issue orders they could almost see the men advance."⁹²

The following year WHAS achieved two further milestones. In May 1925, cramped in one of the cupolas of the famed twin spires at Churchill Downs, Harris and Graft reported the first Kentucky Derby broadcast. As Graft manned the controls with his back towards the race track, Harris, sensing the importance of the event, related so in his introduction to the broadcast:

⁹⁰ Harlow, 20-21.

⁹¹ "Mary Pickford to Announce Film's World Premier by WHAS Tonight," *Courier-Journal*, March 19, 1924.

⁹² "Harris, WHAS Director, Retires After 20 Years," *Courier-Journal* July 2, 1942; "First Battle Ever Radiocast to be Sent by WHAS from Knox," *Courier-Journal*, August 21, 1924; "C-J Radiophone Gives Details of Struggle to Millions," *Courier-Journal*, August 23, 1924.

We are radiocasting to you, for the first time in history, the running of the Kentucky Derby. For this purpose, the engineers of WHAS and the *Courier-Journal* and *The Louisville Times* have, through the courtesy of the Kentucky Jockey Club, installed wires, microphones, amplifying panels and other equipment; high up in one of the cupolas from the top of the famous Churchill Downs grandstand; and from this dizzy place we get a picture, not only of the track and of the big race that is to come, but of the country for many miles in every direction. All of these things we shall try to tell you about as briefly as possible, just as they appear to our eyes. In other words, we are going to see if, for a little while, we can let our eyes be your eyes, and translate the pictures from here into your imaginations. If we succeed we shall be glad.⁹³

As reported by the *Courier*, the first races of the day went off without incident before a rain and hail storm threatened to disrupt the broadcast as the sudden change in weather “nearly tore out the equipment, while the hail shower blurred the windows until it was almost impossible to tell accurately who was in the lead.” Listeners from as far as Nebraska and Texas reported hearing “the hail as it battered the glass . . . and the thunder that drowned the tattoo of cheers.” Harris managed to announce the progression of the race by quarters to a listening audience estimated between five and six million!⁹⁴

To display the rapidity in which radio broadcasting technology was improving, a nation-wide broadcast through NBC came before decade’s end and in 1930 the network used over fifteen miles of wire to connect four announcing stations at each quarter of the track to produce a broadcast that was expected to reach audiences in Europe and Australia.⁹⁵ Technological improvements could not account for human error, however.

⁹³ “WHAS Gives Race Details From Downs,” *Courier-Journal* May 17, 1925. Although a recording of the broadcast is not known to exist, the *Courier* printed Harris’s entire introductory transcript the following morning. While Harris continued announcing up until 1928, Graft continued engineering up in the cupola through 1940 never once witnessing a race with anything but his ears. “For 16 Years He Has Turned Back On Derby,” *Courier-Journal*, May 6, 1940.

⁹⁴ *Ibid.* Harris received word that two individuals in Louisville and one in Illinois died while listening to the Derby broadcast. Although assured these three individuals all suffered from heart disease, which was the cause of death, they haunted him throughout his announcing of the following three years of races. Harris, 117.

⁹⁵ “Will Broadcast Kentucky Derby,” *The New York Times*, March 22, 1929, 30; “Derby Track Wired for Big Broadcast,” *The New York Times*, May 16, 1930, 31.

In a letter dated May 25, 1929, Barry Bingham related to future wife, Mary Caperton, a major mishap on the part of an announcer –not Harris – who called that year’s race:

The *Courier-Journal* radio station was trying to broadcast the race all over the world, to the Byrd expedition at the South Pole, and even to the American Academy in Athens for all I know, but the local announcer got confused at the crucial moment and announced to the waiting world that a horse called Blue Larkspur had won. Father was listening in, nodding paternally as the announcements came through. When he found that a mistake had been made he fell back in a chair in such a state of vexation and embarrassment that Aleen galloped upstairs for the smelling salts, and Compton, the butler cut off the radio at once before any more mistakes could come through.⁹⁶

In September of that year Harris continued to push the boundaries of broadcasting by transmitting a conversation between himself and Col. J.R.R. Hannay while Hannay flew above the city in an airplane. Flying a single-engine, two seated observation airplane equipped with a radio transmitter, “high voltage dynameter, a receiver with the filament, plate batteries, and an interphone,” Hannay spoke to Harris for fifteen minutes while describing the view from an altitude of 5,300 feet. A second pilot flying a plane near Hannay listened to the conversation from his cockpit as well. With each successive year, WHAS sought new territories and gained larger audiences and while the station operated at a loss, it did not affect its parent company. In fact, a full page ad in the December 11, 1925 issue of the *Courier-Journal* the newspaper reported that in November of that year, both newspapers “soared to the greatest circulation heights in their entire history and registered their greatest circulation gains.”

⁹⁶ Barry Bingham to Mary Caperton, Louisville, KY May 25, 1929, Bingham, Mary Caperton 1904 – Papers. 1850 – 1995 Correspondence – 1929 Folder 95, Filson Historical Society, Louisville, KY. Blue Larkspur was the Derby favorite but finished fourth. Clyde Van Dusen was the 1929 Kentucky Derby winner.

Network Affiliation

The growing popularity of the station began receiving national attention. In a profile story in the December 19, 1925 issue of *Christian Science Monitor*, Credo Harris was not shy about why he felt WHAS was a first-class broadcasting station:

We send out no murder trials, no divorces, no crime scandal or liquor stories and bar everything in the way of police news, confining our service to world events, political news of interest from all countries, reports of congressional deliberation and human interest stories especially about animals. . . . We count that day lost when we fail to get something into the program really worthwhile. Likewise, we feel that we are not living up to our ideals if we do not get something over worth thinking about.⁹⁷

Harris and his staff worked hard to make their programming schedule as seamless as possible. “We have learned the utter futility of the superfluous word,” Harris claimed. “It is our rule that no talk shall be more than 500 words long, unless of course it be . . . someone for whom the radio fans are willing to give up a large proportion of the concert time.” Such frugality meant taking a “one thought at a time approach,” towards a subject in order to “get right down to the skeleton,” of it.⁹⁸

This commitment attracted executives from the burgeoning National Broadcasting Company radio network in the fall of 1926. Harris proclaimed the formation of NBC’s Southern portion of its Red network – with WHAS as an original marquee station – began and ended with one long distance phone call on a December afternoon that year. The two entities solidified and maintained their relationship through a gentleman’s agreement; there was no written contract in the entirety of WHAS’s tenure at NBC.⁹⁹ The New Year’s Day edition of the *Courier* carried in it a formal announcement with the

⁹⁷ “Radio Station at Louisville Honors Song,” *Christian Science Monitor*, December 19, 1925.

⁹⁸ *Ibid.*

⁹⁹ Harris, 275. Harris actually says the year was 1927 but that is incorrect.

first NBC program, *The Eveready Hour* set to premier three days later.¹⁰⁰ WHAS declared “only the best attractions will be selected from programmes offered by the Red Chain,” and that the station had “no intention of radiocasting a complete series” of NBC programs. In fact, “the Louisville station,” the *Courier* reported, “expects to send only the foremost offerings such as symphonic concerts, artists’ recitals and other headline attractions” from the network. In between these selections, WHAS would continue with its local programming:

Home talent, which has served radio listeners in such a satisfactory manner since the opening of the Louisville transmitter will continue to play a prominent part in the radio caster’s programmes. Studio officials believe that WHAS’ regular nightly concerts are capable of withstanding nationwide competition, except when metropolitan stars and others internationally renowned are scheduled.¹⁰¹

As Terry Birdwhistell observed, this would be an “optimism which proved unfounded;” however, this is with the gift of hindsight.¹⁰² Within its first decade, WHAS established itself as a reputable radio station intent on providing the best programming possible to its listening public. Doing so required an ability to think outside of the box in terms of ordinary entertainment programming and push the boundaries of what was expected of the nascent technology. Thanks to the financial backing of Robert W. Bingham and the free publicity of the newspapers, WHAS was thriving and providing the services for Louisville and the region its owner envisioned. As a result, Credo Harris and his staff had no reason to be anything other than idealistic and hopeful for the future of WHAS.

¹⁰⁰ *The Eveready Hour*, arranged to sell Eveready batteries through the efforts of the N.W. Ayer advertising agency, was one of the first successful sponsored programs, appearing first on WEAJ before making the transition to NBC. In addition, the show can also claim to be one of the first successful variety revue programs on radio. See Barnouw, *A Tower in Babel*, 159; Jim Cox, *Sold on Radio: Advertisers in the Golden Age of Broadcasting* (Jefferson: McFarland & Company, Inc., 2008), 256.

¹⁰¹ “WHAS Joins Big Chain of Broadcasters,” *Courier-Journal* Jan. 1, 1927

¹⁰² Birdwhistell, “WHAS Radio,” 343.

CHAPTER TWO

“THE TONGUE-LESS SILENCE OF THE DREAMLESS DUSK”

From Mills Point to Big Sandy, the State will not be so isolated ever again. The radio broadcasting station of the two papers will prevent that. Whether the home be hidden in one of the river valleys, a day's journey from a railroad station, or on a mountain pinnacle the ether waves will carry to it the world's latest, whether in news, music or lectures.¹

An analysis of the [radio] situation shows that the greatest effect, however, will not be upon urban dwellers to whom amusement, church attendance, education, and the latest market reports are not novel and easily found elsewhere. The rural inhabitant will be the most benefited and concomitantly most affected. . . . Where roads are poor or almost impassable at certain seasons, or when the weather is so severe that isolated dwellers are cut off from the world, the broadcasting station has become a necessity to the farmer.²

These statements offer a glimpse into the predominant mode of thinking about radio broadcasting in the 1920s. With an emphasis on the isolated, hard-to-reach, or shut-in populations of the United States, the arrival of radio broadcasting promised to enliven and inform the drudgery of daily life in the country's rural areas, providing high-culture entertainment, news reporting, and educational programming otherwise unattainable or inaccessible to millions of Americans. The continual successes of WHAS throughout its first decade and the endless flow of mail the station received evinced that, in their respective ways, music, religion, and sports all drew wide demographic swaths of listeners towards the new medium.

¹ “WHAS is Code for C-J Radio Broadcaster,” *Courier-Journal*, July 13, 1922.

² Beuick, “The Limited Social Effect of Radio Broadcasting,” 618.

The challenge in establishing these programming elements, however, paled in comparison to the immediacy of instituting ones of an educational and informative value that could be beneficial in providing a service to those living outside of urban centers. “It appeared almost at once,” Harris wrote, that “relatively few of that restless, heterogeneous multitude of listeners would tarry with a station which presumed to educate them. They cried for entertainment.” If any talking were to take place, it was to “be short and full of pep;” long speeches agitated listeners who wrote in droves for WHAS to refrain from providing any air time at all for talks or lectures. “I could not tell you why,” Harris admitted, “but the general public wanted none of it. Mr. Average Citizen demanded music.”³ Despite listener protest, this chapter will show how Harris and WHAS endeavored to produce pioneering educational programming, “the most difficult field in which to achieve success,” in large part through a partnership with the University of Kentucky.⁴ That partnership extended through the establishment of the university’s Mountain Radio Listening Center System across the Appalachian region of Eastern Kentucky, in an effort to reduce isolation in the small, secluded communities of the mountain area. However, listener protest did not threaten WHAS’s commitment to and continuance of educational programming. Extending service to areas long condemned, as Ohio Representative Martin L. Sweeney phrased it in a 1939 issue of *Broadcasting*, to “the tongue-less silence of the dreamless dusk,” required constant financial reinvestment in the face of continual deficits.⁵ Also, the issue of saturation

³ Harris, 89-90; 94-95.

⁴ Testimony of Mark Ethridge Before the Federal Communications Commission, April 29, 1946, WHAS . . . Louisville, Kentucky, Clear Channel Hearing, Docket Number 6741, Federal Communications Commission, Washington D.C., A-6.

⁵ Rep. Martin L. Sweeney, Ohio, quoted in “Farms Need Clears, Says Rep. Sweeney,” *Broadcasting*, November 1, 1939, 16.

arose. At its peak, WHAS broadcast programs from five universities; “A mistake,” *Courier-Journal* and *The Louisville Times* Vice-President and General Manager, Mark Ethridge testified before the Federal Communications Commission because, “the quality of the programming deteriorated through the lack of radio skill on the part of educational broadcasters.”⁶ This laying of blame on the universities obscured the surging sea change that washed over radio in the 1930s and 1940s. The rise in popularity of the networks, their programming, and the revenues generated from advertisements proved a salvation to many stations that had stayed the course in radio’s tumultuous first decade. Once radio revealed itself capable of becoming a profitable commercial industry, WHAS and other commercial stations like it across the country faced the tough realization of making programming decisions that favored certain types of programs to the detriment of other types of programs. While not due to a lack of trying, more often than not, educational programming suffered.

Early Education Attempts

Not long after the debut of WHAS, Credo Harris devoted time to illustrating the potential educational benefits of radio. Invited by physics professor, Henry Clay Anderson of the Western State Normal School of Bowling Green, who in a telegram sent to the station claimed WHAS, ““will do more to help advance education in our State than any one thing which has been introduced during the last decade,”” Harris gave a talk at the school, in part lured by Anderson’s claim that, “you can tell over 1,000 teachers what WHAS is going to do for them.”⁷ With the station only two weeks into its existence, it is clear that Harris rooted his talk in the hypothetical; no significant precedent for radio’s

⁶ *Ibid.*, A-6.

⁷ “WHAS Concert is Heard in Far South, 450 Miles From City,” *Courier-Journal*, July 21, 1922.

use in education existed. As a result, Harris suggested ideas such as school children participating “for fifteen minutes” in “setting up exercises with the music and director in the Louisville studio, so that every school child in Kentucky would be taking health giving classes,” which could help “Kentucky . . . jump from the forty-sixth State in the illiteracy list, going over several others in one bound.” Going further, he exclaimed that with radio, “children would have more pleasant times in schools and would, consequently, get more from their lessons.”⁸ Despite its hypothetical nature, Harris appeared adamant to see this aspect of the station to fruition and relayed as much to Secretary of Commerce, Herbert Hoover early that fall:

We are now striving to get adequate receiving sets in the rural schools of Kentucky, and when these installations have reached a certain proportion we shall begin a morning daily program for the children; giving them peppy talks by our biggest men and women, the right kind of music and musical lectures, domestic and physical science and with a band, setting-up exercises, etc. In brief, Mr. Secretary, we are turning radio to the best interests of our people, treating it seriously⁹

Engineers Graft and Harlow found the exercising aspect of the proposal ridiculous reminding Harris that many listeners would be attempting to do so with headsets on. Harris remained determined that it could be done. A physical instructor, once convinced, demonstrated each exercise in a series of photographs later compiled into a chart and mailed out per listener request. Harris claimed that WHAS sent over 9,000 charts through the mail.¹⁰

⁸ “Teachers to be Told Benefit of Radio in Schools,” *Courier-Journal*, July 24, 1922.

⁹ Credo Harris to Herbert Hoover, October 2, 1922, Records of the Federal Communications Commission, General Records Series, 1910-1934 (National Archives, Washington D.C.). Quoted in Terry L. Birdwhistell, “WHAS Radio and the Development of Broadcasting in Kentucky, 1922-1942,” *Kentucky Historical Society Register*, 79, No. 4 (Oct. 1981), 338.

¹⁰ Harris, 215-217. As of yet, no evidence of this chart or newspaper coverage on the subject has been found. The program spanned the winter months and on through April.

Many questions surrounded educational programming: How often should they be produced and broadcast? What should be the duration of the programs? As the novelty of radio began wearing off, stations such as the University of Wisconsin's WHA bore the brunt of listener frustration over material deemed too highbrow, educational, or liberal arts minded. One listener threatened to come after broadcast chief Earl Terry with a pickaxe after Terry commented on rural Wisconsin's underwhelming response to the station's high-cultured programming within Madison's *Capital Times*. In more civil and less dramatic fashion, five farming residents of Darlington, Wisconsin wrote in as a collective to complain about WHA's regular educational lectures:

However much we appreciate the efforts of the extension division of the University . . . these lectures have become an absolute nuisance. A lecture weekly would be all right, but we, after our day spent about our business, desire, in the evening, to listen to musical programs, news items, weather, market reports, etc. .

¹¹

As he alluded to in the 1925 *Christian Science Monitor* profile on WHAS, Harris addressed the public's distaste for talks on the air by paring addresses down to their barest essentials. In order for WHAS to broadcast ninety-two different lectures from the National Safety Council of Chicago, the council had to agree to Harris's demands for the trimming of their scripts. After arguing back and forth through correspondence, writers for the council agreed to "confine each talk to one subject only, and have them prepared the length of a night letter telegram – fifty words – embodying the germ of one idea." Thus, an original three-thousand word lecture on the dangers of boiling water reduced down to this:

¹¹ Quoted in Derek Valliant, "Your Voice Came in Last Night . . . But I Thought it Sounded a Little Scared," in *Radio Reader: Essays in the Cultural History of Radio*, ed. Michelle Hilmes and Jason Loviglio (New York: Routledge, 2002), 63, 73.

Our safety talk tonight is forty-one words long, entitled: Boiling Water is Deadly. Every year thousands of children are seriously scalded when thoughtless persons leave a kettle of boiling water where an inquisitive youngster can reach up and draw it down upon himself! Always place vessels containing scalding water out of a child's reach!¹²

Once deemed un-intrusive, Harris inserted the brief speeches during short breaks between musical performances.¹³

Efforts such as these were minor baby steps. WHAS's first significant step into educational programming came in 1924 with the Agricultural Radio School, a series of lectures prepared by faculty members of the State Agricultural College at the University of Kentucky. Broadcast every Tuesday and Wednesday, the radio school intended to give "the gist of the regular agricultural curriculum offered in the University," with the year's lectures designed to present "a well-rounded series . . . in scientific farming" aimed at young boys and girls, "those unable to attend college," and "even the old time farmer." Lecture topics ranged from "What Kentucky Farmers Should Sow to Supplant Winter Killed Crops," and "Grapes for the Home Garden," to those entitled, "Fences Up and Mortgages Down," and "Feeding and Care of Chicks."¹⁴

Dean of the College of Agriculture, Thomas Cooper, saw "unlimited possibilities" for the radio school. While intended for the farming community, Cooper hoped others would listen to the programs as well. "A very large proportion of the population depends either directly or indirectly upon the wealth produced by the soil," Cooper said. "An understanding of some of the problems of agriculture and of the plans for a further development of the State should bring agriculture the support of other industries and

¹² *Ibid.*, 90-92.

¹³ Credo Harris, "Intimate Peeps into WHAS," *Courier-Journal*, June 29, 1924.

¹⁴ "Radio Farm School Started," *Courier-Journal*, March 26, 1924; "Chick Feeding is Taught by Radio," *Courier-Journal*, April 15, 1924.

professions.”¹⁵ With the exception of broadcasting the weather and market reports as most major stations did at the time, these programs were WHAS’s first major foray into addressing a group the cultured elite argued were radio’s true intended audience: rural America and its farmers.

Radio Comes to the Farm

By the dawn of the 1920s, the term “shut in” most often referred to people who were handicapped, invalid, or reclusive and as a result of their situation were early targets for radio stations, WHAS included. “Last week,” wrote one crippled man to New York station WOR, “the Shut-In Society of Pennsylvania presented me with a radio, and God only knows what despondent and lonely hours it has abolished.”¹⁶ WHAS received countless similar letters of gratitude from incapacitated listeners. An outstanding example came in the form of one boy from Southern Pines, North Carolina. His letters to the station touched Credo Harris so much that WHAS dedicated its first Christmas program to him. In one November letter, the bedridden boy, “ill with a serious hip disease,” gave his thanks “for the beautiful music” WHAS broadcast:

I wait for it every night, and it seems that you are in a dream. I can’t see where it comes from, only a man says WHAS, Louisvilly, Ky [sic]. I am a sick little boy living way down in the sticks of North Carolina, where there is never a band or anything, and I have to lay in bed most of the time just looking at the four walls. But my daddy bought me a radio set, and I hear your music most every night. I just want you to know how much I enjoy it.¹⁷

Visualizing a figure with “wan cheeks, a thin hand outside the coverlet, serious eyes gazing at the four walls through which no music had ever come to temper the loneliness and pain,” Harris began corresponding with the young man calling him the “Squire of

¹⁵ “Dean Cooper Thanks C-J for New Field Opened by WHAS,” *Courier-Journal*, March 26, 1924.

¹⁶ “Said Belle Bart to Edwin Hall,” *The Wireless Age*, (August 1923), 33.

¹⁷ “For a Sick Little Boy Down in the Sticks of North Carolina,” *Courier-Journal*, December 18, 1922.

Southern Pines.” The faculty of the Louisville Conservatory of Music requested to perform the program in the hopes of relaying “the spirit of this lad’s example to every unfortunate who, gripped by some distress, must spend the holiday season gazing at four dreary walls – prisoners of illness, of accident, of habit.”¹⁸

However, almost overnight the popular press altered the definition of “shut in” to describe a person or group in geographical terms rather than physical and with it marked the beginning of radio’s efforts to attract and hook the farming and rural communities of the United States. As Media Historian Randall Patnode observes, “Farmers were depicted by the popular press as ideally positioned to profit from what radio did best: bridge large distances and provide an abundance of information and amusement.”¹⁹ An example Patnode used came directly from the Louisville *Courier-Journal*:

The people of these towns are out of touch with the rest of the world and their chief conversation is gossip [W]hen winter comes life means being shut in by the cold and snow. After supper is over the next three hours are dreaded ones. There is nothing to do but read well-thumbed books and magazines or play a little stale phonograph music. Mother has exhausted her wits thinking of some entertainment that would induce the neighbors to face the cold and spend a sociable evening around the fireplace.²⁰

“According to American mythology,” David Danbom illustrated in his work, *Born in the Country: A History of Rural America*, “the farmer was the paragon of virtue and the backbone of the republic; those who did not farm were, in some way, deficient.” However, two decades into a new century, “farmers had become peculiar . . . objects of concern.” Rural communities began drawing “the attention of altruistic reformers who

¹⁸ *Ibid.*; Harris, 235-237. Harris kept up his correspondence with the sick boy for nine years until the young man passed away. He hoped to get well enough to take Harris fox hunting as a show of thanks.

¹⁹ Randall Patnode, “What These People Need is Radio: New Technology, the Press, and Otherness in 1920s America,” *Technology and Culture*, 44, No. 2 (April 2003), 285.

²⁰ “Radio’s Value to the Farmer is Shown,” *Courier-Journal*, September 2, 1923. Note how shut in now implies being trapped or cut off as opposed to incapacitated or ill.

suggested urban innovations for their institutions and solutions for their problems. The farmer had been transformed from paragon to problem, and rural America from backbone to backwater.”²¹

Indeed these “altruistic reformers,” as Danbom calls them, sprang up in 1908 from the Commission on Country Life, enacted under President Theodore Roosevelt. Designed to identify and address rural improvements, as well as rural and farm labor migration to urban centers resulting from agricultural mechanization, genuine fear existed that the abandonment of small, unsustainable farms would have “economic consequences” while in turn destroying the idea of the “mythic agrarian lifestyle” still so entwined in the American mindset. In conclusion, the Commission found that a solution lay in rural modernization: improving infrastructure to make way for automobiles, telephones and electricity.²² With the arrival of radio, this new technology could engender a need for these amenities as well as open “a huge untapped retail market” to manufacturers of all kinds.²³ It could “eliminate differences between urban and rural life by connecting farm people directly to the ‘civilizing’ aspects of the city and transmit modernizing messages directly to the farm people in an efficient and effective manner.”²⁴

These attitudes presented an interesting dichotomy about the opinion of the farmer. “No other cultural or social group,” Patnode writes, “was identified, isolated, and marginalized by the discourse about radio to the degree that farmers were.”²⁵ Yet, as the

²¹ David B. Danbom, *Born in the Country: A History of Rural America* 2nd ed. (Baltimore: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 2006), 175.

²² Steve Craig, *Out of the Dark: A History of Radio and Rural America* (Tuscaloosa: The University of Alabama Press, 2009), 3. The Commission found that rural isolation was another reason for rural to urban migration.

²³ Patnode, “What these People Need is Radio,” 287.

²⁴ Ronald R. Kline, *Consumers in the Country: Technology and Social Change in Rural America* (Baltimore: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 2000), 114.

²⁵ *Ibid.*, 286

country's progressive urban centers looked down on farmers as a problem, *The New York Times* reported that "one-third the population of the United States lives on farms," and in spite of their assumed backwardness, possessed "one-half the country's buying power." Therefore, with the aid of the popular press, radio stations and manufacturers needed to devise a way in which to sell radio to the farmer and they succeeded by placing value and emphasis on radio's utilitarian qualities as opposed to its promotion of leisure. Popular thinking prevailed that to do so would require "starting a campaign for the purpose of educating the farmers in the practical value of radio on the farm."²⁶ *The New York Times* perpetuates the farmer stereotype in explaining the necessity for these demonstrations:

Radio is an intangible thing to the farmer; he does not understand the principles and does not care to exert himself to find out. Demonstrating the use of radio by letting him do the manipulating would be the best method. He becomes interested in a thing of that nature only when he can get his hands on it and get results himself.²⁷

Through a joint effort with the National Radio Chamber of Commerce, county agents from the Department of Agriculture travelled throughout farming communities conducting radio demonstrations. These demonstrations, consisting of setting up, tuning, and repairing receiving sets were essential to radio's proliferation in rural areas. Farmers faced a much more difficult task than their urban counterparts in setting up radio receiving sets in their homes which dissuaded many from the investment. While crystal sets were inexpensive to purchase or assemble, their reception was unreliable past "twelve or fifteen miles," an impracticality that resulted in few farms owning them. Instead, "nearly two thirds" of farm sets "were equipped with three or more tubes," and

²⁶ "Radio: New Autumn Season Stirs Interest; Demonstrations to Farmers," *The New York Times*, September 2, 1923, x10.

²⁷ "Survey Reveals How Radio is Serving American Farmers," *The New York Times*, November 16, 1924, xx15.

other “technically sophisticated circuitry to pull in distant stations,” meaning a radio in the farm home would “rarely cost less than \$100.” Antennae atop the peaks of barns or windmills became common as farmers looked to boost reception in any manner they could.²⁸ Dodging the problem of rural electrification, “early sets . . . ran on batteries – an acid-filled ‘A’ battery; a dry-cell ‘B’ battery, and sometimes a third, which was a dry-cell ‘C’ battery.” These batteries were heavy and impractical, requiring regular maintenance and recharging which was expensive and could leave the home without a radio for days or weeks.²⁹

Radio’s undeniable appeal and the demonstrations put on by the county agents led to sharp increases in radio ownership within farming communities. By 1925, Secretary of Agriculture William M. Jardine reported that approximately 553,000 radio sets were in the homes of farmers, up from 1923’s figure of 145,000.³⁰ “The need of weather forecasts, crop and market reports,” the Secretary proclaimed, “as well as entertainment and educational talks, furnished by radio, make the agriculturist one of the nation’s biggest radio users.”³¹ These statistics can be misleading as the adoption of radio in rural communities varied. Within Kentucky, early evidence of rural areas benefitting from radio is hard to define. Early on, WHAS compiled statistical listener data through the literal counting of letters which they received by the hundreds of thousands. Later they

²⁸ Gerald Breckenridge, *The Radio Boys on the Mexican Border* (New York: The A.L. Burt Company, 1922), viii; James F. Evans, *Prairie Farmer and WLS: The Burrige D. Butler Years* (Chicago: The University of Illinois Press, 1969), 157; Craig, *Out of the Dark*, 79; Kathryn Jellison, *Entitled to Power: Farm Women and Technology, 1913-1963* (Chapel Hill: The University of North Carolina, 1993), 56.

²⁹ Kline, *Consumers in the Country*, 114-115; Craig, *Out of the Dark*, 79. Both Craig and Evans acknowledge that rather than lose access to the radio by sending their batteries off for recharging, farmers would swap out automobile or tractor batteries or construct crude wind or gasoline generators as alternate sources of power.

³⁰ “Survey Reveals Radio Sets on Farms Now Total 553,000,” *The New York Times*, December 13, 1925, 15.

³¹ *Ibid.*

would invest over \$50,000 in scientific surveys which helped keep the station informed of their listeners' "needs and desires in the way of radio."³² One evident way to satiate the needs of its rural listeners was to guarantee reception from all points within Kentucky requiring a significant reinvestment on the part of Robert Bingham and the newspapers for new equipment and new facilities.

A Step Up in Power

As 1928 dawned, WHAS received notification for a change in frequency from the new Federal Radio Commission in Washington D.C. Operating at 650 kilocycles was presenting problems for the station as KLRD in Dallas, Texas and KFNF in Shenandoah, Iowa broadcast from the same frequency and often bled into WHAS's signal. Assigned the duty of clearing twenty-five channels between 600 to 1000 kilocycles of the spectrum, the Commission awarded WHAS with its own frequency of 930 kilocycles, still broadcasting with 500 watts power.³³ In light of this assignment, WHAS requested and received authorization for the construction of a new transmitter and new studio facilities. Offices and "luxuriously-appointed and enlarged studios," replete with new RCA condenser microphones and "the latest acoustical perfections," relocated from the top level of the Fireproof Storage Building down to its second and third floors. Twelve and one-half miles outside of Louisville, off of Taylorsville Road in Jeffersontown, lay the site of the new transmitter. An RCA-5A, 5,000-watt transmitter fed a "T-type," modified Fan antenna configuration consisting of a "190-foot horizontal wire supporting

³² Barry Bingham insisted this method was how WHAS calculated its annual listenership in its beginning years. With the exception of a scant number of letters that appear within the newspapers, archives and Harris's book, all listener letters are lost and with them the expressions and reactions that would help explain the service they felt the station provided them. Bingham interview; Testimony of Mark Ethridge Before the Federal Communications Commission, April 29, 1946, A-4.

³³ "70 Radiophones Get New Figures," *Courier-Journal*, November 17, 1927. This change in frequency was not the first in WHAS's history. Frequency changes will be addressed later in Chapter Four.

several 177-foot vertical down leads,” strung across two, two-hundred foot-tall steel towers. Buried beneath the ground between the two towers were six, spider-like patterns comprised of a “complicated underground system, using more than one and a half miles of copper wire in addition to several large buried copper plates,” designed to “balance the ground absorption constant to the antenna field.” Special features within the new transmitter included a quartz crystal-controlled oscillator for frequency stabilization and harmonic suppression, “special four-element, water-cooled radiotrons [vacuum tubes],” and a constant current supply afforded through plate modulation which would enable WHAS to produce programs of “the utmost fidelity,” through a strengthened signal. The new equipment required constant supervision and a building constructed on site housed a resident engineer, on call day and night.³⁴

All of these new investments came while the station continued operating at a loss. The deficit-spending helps explain the pessimistic tone pervading throughout Bingham’s response letter to Victor Hanson of *The Birmingham News* and *The Birmingham Age-Herald* as their correspondence came on the heels of these upgrades. Before affiliation with NBC, WHAS did very little to generate revenue by way of program sponsorship, although many businesses solicited for the opportunity. Any kind of advertising over the radio was a delicate issue early on, debated within the growing radio industry, the popular press, and in Washington.³⁵ In an address at the first National Radio Conference in

³⁴ Merrill Dowden, “Transmitter of 5,000-Watt Power Ready,” *Courier-Journal*, November 11, 1928; Baysinger, “65 Years of Service,” 2; “Airplane Pictures Show Layout of New 5,000-Watt Transmitting Station,” *Courier-Journal*, August 30, 1928; “WHAS Will Put 5,000-Watt Transmitter in Service Oct. 1,” *Courier-Journal*, July 20, 1928. With the new transmitting station, the engineering/operating personnel of WHAS had to expand. Upon going online, the staff consisted of Emmett Graft, R.C. Barry, Carl Nielsen, and Milo W. Utterback. “Operating Personnel of Station WHAS,” *Courier-Journal*, September 30, 1928.

³⁵ For detailed studies of the issue see Kathy M. Newman, *Radio Active: Advertising and Consumer Activism, 1935-1947* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2004); Susan Smulyan, *Selling Radio: The Commercialization of American Broadcasting, 1920-1934* (Washington D.C.: Smithsonian Institution Press,

February, 1922, Herbert Hoover proclaimed: "It is inconceivable that we should allow so great a possibility for service, for news, for entertainment, for education, and for vital commercial purposes to be drowned in advertising chatter."³⁶ On August 28, 1922, the first commercial advertisement went out over the airwaves of WEAJ to little fanfare however, as radio grabbed a foothold with the American public and the need for revenue increased, stations acquiesced to the advances of companies and businesses and advertising crept onto the airwaves.³⁷

Harris was not enthusiastic about the oncoming trend. In a letter to the Radio Division of the Department of Commerce, he stated both his displeasure and pragmatism concerning advertising:

Permitting any sort of advertising over our station is the very last thing we wish to do, but if other stations are encouraging it we shall be more and more embarrassed when our Louisville friends continue to ask for this privilege. Is there some rule that prohibits this?³⁸

Despite simmering public antipathy for advertising on the radio, no rules or regulations against it existed and WHAS entered into it in minor comical fashion. In October 1925, WHAS agreed to broadcast an hour-long program under the sponsorship of Dutch Master Cigars, a Chicago cigar manufacturer. Paying \$400 for the hour, the company had similar arrangements in other cities, including St. Louis, Denver, and Ft. Worth, Texas. In an added bit of public relations, the company agreed to mail three free cigars to any

1994); Jim Cox, *Sold on Radio: Advertisers in the Golden Age of Broadcasting* (Jefferson: McFarland & Company, Inc., 2008); Roland Marchand, *Advertising the American Dream: Making Way for Modernity, 1920-1940* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1985); Jackson Lears, *Fables of Abundance: A Cultural History of Advertising in America* (New York: Basic Books, 1994).

³⁶ "Asks Radio Experts to Chart the Ether," *The New York Times*, February 29, 1922, 16.

³⁷ Banning, *Commercial Broadcasting Pioneer*, 90. The advertisement was a fifteen-minute talk by the Queensboro Corporation concerning their new apartment properties in Jackson Heights, New York.

³⁸ Credo Harris to D.B. Carson, April 13, 1923, Records of the Federal Communications Commission, General Records Series, 1910-1934 (National Archives, Washington D.C.). Quoted in Birdwhistell, "WHAS Radio," 341.

listener who wrote them concerning their programs. Three weeks into the broadcasts WHAS received word the programs would be discontinued: "Please stop immediately," a company representative wrote in a telegram. "Am using twenty girls to mail cigars and four days behind already. We cannot stand it. No one can stand it. Stop immediately."³⁹

The station had much better success through its relationship with the Greater Louisville First Federal Savings and Loan Association. The company's treasurer, Gustav Flexner helped create the Greater Louisville Ensemble, a choral group, and oversaw the construction of its own studio facility within the Greater Louisville Building at 417 W. Market Street. On New Year's Eve, 1925, WHAS remote broadcast a performance of the group, beginning a relationship that extended through the next two decades.⁴⁰ Speaking on the program's fourteenth anniversary, Greater Louisville President L. Frank Withers confessed the motivation behind the program's origination: "The entire effect . . . has been to fix in the listener's mind 'Greater Louisville.'" He further added:

We believe that when you think of investing or when you think of borrowing, the name Greater Louisville comes before you. That is what we have been trying to sell, goodwill. We think we have it, we hope to keep it. That's advertising. Without its benefits to us, we could not give you entertainment. Without us and others like us, the radio stations would not function like they do.⁴¹

Indirect advertising from local businesses contributed little to off-setting the hemorrhaging costs of maintaining a first-rate radio station. The station's initial affiliation with NBC was of no help either as the station delved deeper into the red from operating costs and new equipment. However, the newspapers continued the supply of

³⁹ Harris, 37-39.

⁴⁰ Nielsen interview; "Greater Louisville to Celebrate Sixth Year of WHAS Radio," *Courier-Journal*, January 3, 1931.

⁴¹ "Radio Pays, Bank Discovers: Louisville Institution Shows Amazing Growth as Result of 13 Years on the Air," *Broadcasting*, January 15, 1939, 24. In the article Flexner attributed the association's growth from \$2,000,000 in 1925 to \$11,000,000 in 1939 as a direct result of the Greater Louisville Ensemble program.

funding to ensure WHAS kept pace with the industry's growth with no signs of moving anywhere but forward.

Entering into their second year as an NBC affiliate, the *Courier-Journal* touted that with the new transmitter, WHAS would offer a new schedule and range of programming with "entertaining, educational, and informative features." The station would air NBC programs from "General Motors, Stromberg, Carlson, Wrigley, Maxwell House, Palmolive, Armstrong, Eveready, Seiberling," among many others, including ninety-minute broadcasts Monday evenings from the National Grand Opera Company and full hour-long performances from the Lucky Strike Dance Orchestra. "Further diversity will be assured by the noon-time Farm and Home Hour, especially designed for rural folk," the paper reported. "Great Moments in History," and weekly biblical dramas comprised the shade of NBC's educational programming umbrella.⁴² WHAS began broadcasting with its new transmitter on November 11 from yet another new frequency, 820 kilocycles, a nationally cleared-channel by the Federal Radio Commission made effective in October with additional permission to increase power to 10,000 watts when deemed necessary. Early morning tests conducted each day the week prior brought mail, telegraph messages, and phone calls from listeners in thirty-five states and beyond. "Received your test Wednesday morning here good, and clear," wrote W.F. Staines of Regina, Saskatchewan, Canada, "although the Northern lights were showing, so you can see it was pretty good."⁴³ With the increase in power and its new, cleared frequency, WHAS found itself in an unprecedented position to be of real service to the entirety of

⁴² "WHAS Offers Finest Bills Air Affords," *Courier-Journal*, November 11, 1928. Other NBC programs listed included those by the Hoover Sentinels, Clicquot Club Eskimos, Major Bowes and his Capitol "Family," Peerless Reproducers, the Acousticon Hour, RCA Demonstration Hour, and the Stetson Parade.

⁴³ Dowden, "Transmitter of 5,000-Watt Power Ready," *Courier-Journal*, November 11, 1928; "WHAS Sends On Increased Power, 'Comes in Clear' Throughout the U.S.," *Courier-Journal*, November 12, 1928;

Kentucky in the manner Robert Bingham had intended. Opportunity materialized from nothing more than a simple conversation within WHAS studios early the following year.

“The University is on the Air”

In early 1929, after playing bassoon in a broadcast of the University Philharmonic Orchestra over WHAS in Louisville, Elmer G. Sulzer, Public Relations Director and music instructor with the University of Kentucky, discussed the possibility of an on-campus extension studio of the station in Lexington with announcer, Ford Bond. As Sulzer later recalled, Bond approached Harris with the idea and received an enthusiastic reception.⁴⁴ University president Dr. Frank L. McVey saw an extension studio of WHAS as an opportunity to increase the prestige of the university by allying itself with a technological outlet capable of releasing education from the confines of the lecture hall and allowing it to spread into homes across Kentucky.

The University rejoices in the cooperative arrangement made with the *Courier-Journal* and *The Louisville Times* for radio programs over the station WHAS. It is desirable, in fact, essential, that a state university should be associated with radio development and in addition, the University has in its faculty, libraries, and museums a great deal of material of value to the citizens of the State.⁴⁵

Dean Cooper and the College of Agriculture looked to pick up where they left off with WHAS in 1924. “We appreciate the opportunity for increasing contacts and for rendering a broader service which is afforded through WHAS,” Cooper drafted in a university memo. “The Experiment Station and Agricultural Department staffs regard the

⁴⁴ Transcription of “Tape of Elmer Sulzer – Founder of WBKY-FM,” No Date, Departmental File – to 1965, Box 59, General Reference File – 1865-1965 Radio Arts, General Reference File, 1865-1955, Radio Station WBKY, University Archives, Margaret I. King Library, University of Kentucky, Lexington, KY, 1.

⁴⁵ “Memo from Dr. Frank L. McVey,” March 23, 1929, Departmental File – to 1965, Box 59, General Reference File – 1865-1965 Radio Arts, General Reference File, 1865-1955, Radio Station WBKY, University Archives, Margaret I. King Library, University of Kentucky, Lexington, KY.

arrangements made for broadcasting farm and home programs as a splendid opportunity to supplement their present service throughout the state.”⁴⁶

WHAS provided the necessary equipment and funded its installation in the Music Department within the university’s Arts Center located on the corner of Harrison and Euclid streets in Lexington. Engineers retro-fitted the band room to serve as the main studio with an instrument storage closet chosen as the control room. A small classroom acted as the talk studio. WHAS provided a carbon microphone for each room with control capability for switching between the two. A “strip telephone circuit devoid of amplifiers,” led from the studio in Lexington to Louisville. WHAS engineers amplified the signal upon its reception in Jeffersontown and broadcast it from their transmitter. The university and WHAS each agreed to pay half of the monthly wire charges for use of the telephone line.⁴⁷

At 12:15pm, on April 1, 1929, WHAS inaugurated the new partnership with a fifteen minute program of speeches from Robert W. Bingham and President McVey, followed by a brief organ performance before the University Quartette closed with two musical selections. Speaking from Louisville, Bingham expressed his aspirations for the partnership, much in the same fashion as he expressed to Credo Harris his aspirations for WHAS seven years earlier:

Many Kentucky homes are still remote and isolated, cut off from communication with the outside world except through this one medium, the radiophone. Hidden away in their inaccessibility by ordinary methods of transportation and communication, many thousands of Kentuckians are deprived of church and school, of medical advice, of the inspiring influence of art and of music, and must

⁴⁶ “Memo from Thomas P. Cooper Dean of Agriculture, UK,” March 23, 1929, Departmental File – to 1965, Box 59, General Reference File – 1865-1965 Radio Arts, General Reference File, 1865-1955, Radio Station WBKY, University Archives, Margaret I. King Library, University of Kentucky, Lexington, KY.

⁴⁷ “Tape of Elmer Sulzer,” 1-2.

struggle with nearly insuperable handicaps in cultivating their soil. To these we now have the privilege to bring help and pleasure, to offer information and education, otherwise unattainable, and so to cultivate that innate resources of a great number whose potentialities, when afforded an opportunity, are nearly limitless. All who listen will profit, we hope, by this service which we inaugurate, but it is those whose need is greatest who fill my mind as I think of what this work of ours may mean to them.⁴⁸

Bingham also announced that once “[WHAS] found we could co-operate with the university,” preparations began for the station to increase its power to the 10,000-watt limit permitted by the FRC the previous fall. Educational and informative programming proved the necessity behind the move “in order to be sure,” Bingham asserted, WHAS can “lay down our signal in every spot within the borders of Kentucky, in any and all circumstances.”⁴⁹ A tentative schedule of programs began Monday through Friday between the daytime period of 12:45pm to 1:00pm, with Wednesday nights between ten and eleven reserved for “music by the University Band, glee clubs and orchestra.” On Monday, Wednesday, and Friday, the College of Agriculture, Experiment Station, and the Department of Home Economics were in charge of producing programming Cooper promised would be “useful and interesting . . . for farmers.” Other programming would fill in the remaining available time, generated from departments in English (“New Books”), History (“Early Men in Kentucky”), Home Economics (“Hygiene, Personal and Community”), and Science (“Bacteriology, Friends and Foes of the Pantry”), among others.⁵⁰

Through the next decade, the partnership prospered with minor growing pains expectant of a new radio station. WHAS reprimanded the university on one occasion due to numerous complaints stemming from a Bacteriology discussion on the contamination

⁴⁸ “Facilities at U.K. Made Available to State Through WHAS Studio,” *Courier-Journal*, April 2, 1929.

⁴⁹ *Ibid.*

⁵⁰ *Ibid.*

of cesspools in rural areas. A radio turned on during the noon hour, projected the program throughout the popular dining room of the Kentucky Hotel, causing sitting lunch customers to push away their plates and phone WHAS in disgust.⁵¹ The real issue lay in the specificity of content within the original lectures. It is hard to imagine a rural Kentucky audience tuning into Dr. Amry Valdenbosch's Political Science lectures for their entirety with introductions such as this: "At our last discussion we were studying the French Chamber of Deputies and the German Reichstag from the standpoint of multiparty politics."⁵² The same can be said for English and Literature professor E.F. Farquhar and his literary reviews like that of Vyvyan Holland's French translation of Julian Green's *The Dark Journey*:

It is beyond question that Poe was the first man to deal with mind as malady in terms of heredity and environment long before psychology developed any rationale of behavior and a nomenclature for it. Green almost always deals with suppression and frustration among provincial folk in the matter of sex.⁵³

Much like Harris, professors on the radio had to acquire "the technique of presenting their material in ways to be effective." Failure to do so threatened the efficacy of any educational program. "Broadcasting," wrote Dr. A.G. Crane, President of the University of Wyoming and chairman of the National Committee on Education by Radio, "was not a simple amateur task. Frequently the finest scholars, highly successful in writing or lecturing, made a sickening flop before the microphone."⁵⁴ A classroom offered the student no escape from the instructor whereas the radio's tuning dial offered immediate gratification and release from the clutches of aural boredom. The process of appealing to

⁵¹ Tape of Elmer Sulzer, 3-4.

⁵² Dr. Amry Valdenbosch, Political Science, December 4, 1930, WHAS Radio Scripts, Box 2, Folder 1, University Archives, Margaret I. King Library, University of Kentucky, Lexington, KY.

⁵³ E.F. Farquhar, "*The Dark Journey* by Julian Green, Translated from the French by Vyvyan Holland, Harper and Bros., NY, 1929," Book Reviews by Farquhar, Folder 1, WHAS Radio Scripts, Box 1, University Archives, Margaret I. King Library, University of Kentucky, Lexington, KY.

⁵⁴ Harris, 95; Dr. A.G. Crane, "Solving the Radio Education Problem," *Broadcasting*, May 15, 1938, 41.

the average listener was one of constant revision brought on by experience acquired through trial and error. By 1939, however, the University of Kentucky was a well-oiled production facility, planning and editing its broadcasts “to be of value as supplementary material to all students in the seventh grade and over” faring better with listeners than with its initial lectures.⁵⁵

WHAS did much to expand and publicize its involvement in educational programming. By 1931, the University of Louisville had its own extension studios which broadcast programs four days a week over the station.⁵⁶ Programs from Asbury College began airing in 1932; Pikeville College made its first broadcast over WHAS in October of 1934 but discontinued its studio’s operation due to inadequate transmission lines that December. Eastern Kentucky State Teachers College made their debut that October as well.⁵⁷ These expansions did little to distract attention from the programs produced through the University of Kentucky which WHAS made clear was their premier source for educational material.

In June 1937, the station, with the University of Kentucky, presented a program from the rooftop garden of the Brown Hotel to the American College Publicity Association, in Louisville for their annual meeting. The program’s planner, Elmer Sulzer, structured the proceedings to demonstrate the “degree of cooperation between a major educational institution and major radio station,” touting such a relationship was “unparalleled in American radio history.” WHAS Program Manager, Joe Eaton – a former station announcer – gave its introduction in front of members of the association:

⁵⁵ “University of Kentucky Radio Programs, January, 1939 to June, 1939,” (Lexington: University of Kentucky Publicity Bureau, 1939), 31.

⁵⁶ “U.L. to Have Campus Studio – Is Extension of WHAS,” *Courier-Journal*, September 27, 1931.

⁵⁷ Larry R. Baysinger, “Interesting Radio Dates,” WHAS Archival File, Louisville, KY, 1-2.

This program, this afternoon, is designed as an object demonstration as to how three diversified educational programs can be made to approximate the showmanship and production perfection of high priced commercial offerings, without any loss of ethics, or the addition of anything that might be foreign to the wishes of the educators.⁵⁸

Acclaimed “authority, collector, and publisher,” of American Folk music, John Jacob Niles, presented the first of three, fifteen-minute programs, which also included a brief discussion and performance of light opera, and an historic dramatization concerning the origins of Reelfoot Lake.⁵⁹ Meanwhile, the university succeeded in securing members of the State Department of Education for a six-part series entitled, “Looking Forward to Educational Progress in Kentucky,” to begin in January of 1938; but it had become clear that despite its best efforts, WHAS and UK were struggling to engage its audience in educational programs.

That fall, WHAS hosted a conference for Dr. John W. Studebaker, the United States’ Commissioner on Education who, along with radio executives and educators from across Kentucky, Tennessee, and Ohio, gathered to discuss and brainstorm ideas on education and the radio. While there, Allen Miller, director of the University Broadcasting Council of Chicago expressed his frustration and “personal failures in his efforts to develop educational broadcasts.” Appearing flustered, Miller felt educational programs were often “too limited in their appeal,” with universities and schools exacerbating the problem by seeking “publicity for themselves instead of rendering a

⁵⁸ Transcription of “45 Minutes of Model Educational Broadcasting Presented by WHAS, University of Kentucky, University of Louisville Cooperating. Before the Annual Meeting of the American College Publicity Association, Louisville, Kentucky,” June 26, 1937, 1. This transcription was found in the Stephen A. Schwarzman building of the New York Public Library, on Fifth Avenue at 42nd Street in Manhattan.

⁵⁹ *Ibid.*, 8.

public service.”⁶⁰ Sulzer looked to prevent this attitude from occurring within the state and along with other representatives from radio stations and educational institutions formed a committee, The Kentucky Council on Education by Radio the following month. The committee aimed to “educate persons engaged in preparing educational broadcasts for schools, colleges, and similar institutions on the methods and limitations of radio in education and to advise stations on the educational worth of programs offered them.” The council adopted a nine-part code of ethics to facilitate a “cooperative relationship between commercial broadcasters and educators in the public interest.” Sulzer made sure to provide an example of this cooperation and had UK add a course, entitled “Problems in Radio Education,” to the 1939 summer course schedule. WHAS staff members, including Harris, Manager Lee Coulson, and Program Director, Robert Kennett, volunteered to lead discussions during the summer session.⁶¹

Such proactive efforts failed to sustain enthusiasm for educational programming and discouraging news arrived in an August 1939 letter addressed to President McVey from Harris: “Situations affecting our autumn radio schedule with the University have arisen which bring me the painful personal duty of changing, and somewhat limiting, the University’s time.” The university’s entire noontime programming, save for the weekends, was to be surrendered to network programming. Harris promised McVey that WHAS had not “entirely despaired of recapturing a few [time slots],” but the likelihood

⁶⁰ “Educational Radio Problems Discussed as Four States Confer in Louisville,” *Broadcasting*, October 15, 1938, 32.

⁶¹ “Kentucky Educators,” *Broadcasting*, November 15, 1938, 49; “Kentucky Council Formulates a Code to Guide Educators and Broadcasters,” *Broadcasting*, March 15, 1939, 70; “Radio and Education,” *Broadcasting*, March 15, 1939, 67; “Radio Course Opens Today in Lexington,” *Courier-Journal*, June 13, 1939.

of that happening was doubtful.⁶² In a letter to Mark Ethridge the next month, McVey responded to this decision:

We are told that contracts with the Columbia Broadcasting System⁶³ compelled this station to give up this noon day time for the use of some of the sponsors. This change in the set up breaks down the cooperation that has been carried on with the Kentucky Schools of the state, many of which planned upon programs worked up for them by the University. . . . The University of Kentucky has endeavored to keep faith with WHAS for the time allotted to it, improving its facilities, increasing its staff; additional personnel has been provided and recently the studios have been re-organized and re-located at a cost of \$13,000.⁶⁴

Mark Ethridge's responding letter signaled a sea change in attitudes at the station that had been bubbling throughout the decade of the 1930s. "I approved the original notice to the University of Kentucky," Ethridge wrote, "and in light of your letter I have re-canvassed the situation. My feeling is the same as it was then." Noting that CBS had indeed requested more station time, Ethridge issued a blunt statement for WHAS's acquiescence to the network:

None of our people here feels that we could support the position that . . . the University programs are strictly in the public interest. As a matter of fact, I think I should say frankly to you that our people feel that when the University undertakes such things as language teaching and certain types of music appreciation programs the time is very largely lost. That is not merely our opinion, but is substantiated by surveys which show a sharp drop in our early afternoon programs. We attribute a good part of that to the tuning out from the University's programs.⁶⁵

Despite the tone of Ethridge's letter, the relationship between the two continued. While this paper exchange passed between Louisville and Lexington, the Federal Radio

⁶² Credo Harris to Frank L. McVey, August 25, 1939, Departmental File – to 1965, General Reference File 1865-1955, Box, 59, Radio Station WBKY, University Archives, Margaret I. King Library, University of Kentucky, Lexington, KY.

⁶³ WHAS became affiliated with the Columbia Broadcasting System in 1932 to cut down on program duplication resulting from nine NBC affiliates broadcasting within a 500-mile radius of Louisville. "WHAS is Expected to Sextuple Listeners With CBS Connection," *Courier-Journal*, May 11, 1932.

⁶⁴ Frank L. McVey to Mark Ethridge, September 21, 1939, Departmental File – to 1965.

⁶⁵ Mark Ethridge to Frank L. McVey, September 25, 1939, *ibid.*

Education Committee chose to reuse the university's James Audubon dramatic series for its own intended purposes. Furthermore, the university decided their re-adjusted timeslots would host three new programs: "Behind the Headlines," a Sunday noon roundtable; "Capsules of Knowledge," a music and lecture program, and the student-led, sports and gossip program, "Wildcat Review."⁶⁶ It was the "Capsules of Knowledge" program that prompted a letter to Sulzer from WHAS Program Manager, Robert L. Kennett. Citing a survey, Kennett claimed, "From eight to nine o'clock on Thursday, against all stations in this area, we command 80% of the audience. At nine o'clock, we immediately drop to 8%." Sulzer did not need any further explanation. Although Kennett granted that "the opposition at that hour is perhaps at its best with Bing Crosby," "Capsules of Knowledge" was the cause of the drop in ratings and therefore canceled by the station in February of 1940.⁶⁷

Other factors lay behind the decision to issue such bold and damning statements to the university: continued investments throughout the 1930s for new equipment and power increases, operating costs, and legal fees for appeals in Washington kept escalating. After just eight years of operation, WHAS had cost its parent company \$211,000 in overall investments, with the annual operating cost for 1930 reaching \$196,885 in the face of \$176,000 in total annual revenues.⁶⁸ Preparing for his role as General Manager and Vice President of the papers after his father's acceptance of Franklin D. Roosevelt's Ambassadorship appointment to the Court of St. James in Great Britain, Barry Bingham questioned whether the newspapers should continue investing in

⁶⁶ "Radio and Education," *Broadcasting*, September 15, 1939, 75; *ibid.*, October 1, 1939, 66.

⁶⁷ Robert L. Kennett to Elmer G. Sulzer, January 23, 1940, Frank L. McVey Papers, University Archives, Margaret I. King Library, University of Kentucky, Lexington, KY. Quoted in Birdwhistell, 351.

⁶⁸ "Power Increase for WHAS Ok'd," *Courier-Journal*, December 16, 1930.

WHAS at all. “All of this radio business is on my mind a great deal and I want you to consider it very seriously when we can talk it over,” he wrote in a letter to his father. “I believe,” he continued, “we ought to take stock of the situation and try to see what we are getting ourselves into with the constant demand for increased power and increased expenditures in the radio field.”⁶⁹

Credo Harris reported a different picture to his boss. A succession of letters to Bingham began to detail, at long last, the financial blossoming of the radio station. In July of 1934: “WHAS is about \$36,000.00 net ahead for the first six months this year;” April of 1935: “Quite parenthetically I may add . . . that your radio station should top \$19,000 net profit for March. Thus ticketh the clock at 3rd and Liberty;” and October of 1936:

Your WHAS will have the biggest October in its history, a net profit of above \$18,000. November will bloom almost as profusely and December only a little less. I am shooting at a net profit for 1936 of close to \$130,000 – which will best last year by about \$15,000. The department is operating like a well-oiled fine machine, splendid loyalty, intelligence and efficiency – and that goes for the entire organization.⁷⁰

The decision to switch from NBC to CBS provided the push WHAS needed to enter the black for the first time in its history.

Another Harris letter to Bingham concerning WHAS, however, offers an

⁶⁹ Barry Bingham to Robert W. Bingham, November 12, 1935, George Barry Bingham Papers, 1861-1989, Copies of Corr. RWB to BB – 1933-1937, Folder 1091, Filson Historical Society, Louisville, KY. This letter is telling for one additional reason: Barry mentions an argument between Harris and Emmanuel Levi, then-General Manager of the papers concerning “radio business” Levi was not consulted on. This business entailed the possibility of operating WHAS and radio station WAVE – by 1933 on the air as an NBC affiliate – “under an open identity of ownership, which would mean sharing the same studios and making many other savings in operating expenses.” The deal never materialized but offers an interesting insight into the ambitions of Harris and the elder Bingham to control and oversee radio within Louisville. Mark Ethridge replaced Levi in 1936 after Levi left for the *Chicago Herald and Examiner*. “The Press: Louisville’s Gain,” *Time*, April 27, 1936.

⁷⁰ Credo Harris to Robert W. Bingham, July 17, 1934; April 7, 1935; October 27, 1936, Microfilm of Papers of Robert Worth Bingham, 1918 – 1937, Rolls 7, 10, and 14, Filson Historical Society, Louisville, KY.

additional window of explanation into the developing attitudes expressed by Ethridge and Kennett. In 1934, Harris was called upon to testify before the new Federal Communications Commission by the National Association of Broadcasters who acknowledged “the record of WHAS stood best in the country before the old Commission.” His testimony would be part of special hearings for the purpose of deciding whether or not the new commission would “request Congress to appropriate 25% of all commercial wavelengths to be turned over to religious and educational institutions.” The Radio Act of 1927 favored more powerful and well-funded radio stations throughout the United States. It established a commission to hold hearings and assign frequencies; issue, renew, and revoke licenses to broadcast, basing all decisions under the Act’s vague requirements that stations meet “the public interest, convenience, or necessity.” This language was interpreted a myriad of ways however, the Act was criticized for providing high-powered, well-funded stations with an advantage. Its revision, the Communications Act of 1934, cemented the status quo of commercial broadcasters, driven by advertising, as the American system of radio broadcasting. Critics of the legislation attempted to highlight the inherent problems of the system as structured: one third of the stations in the United States were network affiliated yet the networks “ruled almost 90% of the nation’s transmitting power because they controlled most of the high-power stations across the country.”⁷¹ Government officials, such as Democrat Ohio Representative, Martin L. Sweeney, saw high-powered commercial stations as the one guaranteed outlet for providing adequate broadcast service to rural

⁷¹ Lenthall, “Critical Reception: Public Intellectuals Decry Depression-Era Radio, Mass Culture, and Modern America,” in *Radio Reader: Essays in the Cultural History of Radio*, 53.

citizens.⁷² Commercial opponents pushed for the Wagner-Hatfield Amendment to the legislation which offered an opportunity for religious, educational, and not-for-profit stations to acquire a 25% portion of the favorable radio spectrum. Corporate and commercial broadcasting interests lobbied hard to see the amendment fail, Harris and WHAS included. While it can be argued that WHAS's record with the University of Kentucky provided ample evidence that a commercial broadcaster could act in the public interest and provide adequate educational programming through cooperation with an institution of higher learning, it can also be argued that economic self-interest may have been a factor in Harris and WHAS testifying against the amendment which they viewed as threatening to jeopardize their burgeoning position as a profitable, powerful, and influential station in their region. Allowing smaller stations access to favorable frequencies could undermine the prestige and goodwill WHAS had accumulated and could thus cause potential difficulties in future requests for construction permits, power increases, and frequency assignments from the Commission.⁷³

Agricultural Programs

All was not lost for the University of Kentucky. One aspect of the university's programming both Harris and Ethridge intended to keep remained clear: the productions from the College of Agriculture. "We propose to keep the College of Agriculture program, which we regard as a good one," Ethridge wrote to McVey. "The only exception that can be made to the Columbia contract is to maintain that programs are in

⁷² "Farms Need Clears," *Broadcasting*, November 1, 1939.

⁷³ Credo Harris to Robert W. Bingham, September 8, 1934, *ibid.*, Roll 7. For a detailed description of this legislation see Erik Barnouw's, *The Golden Web: A History of Broadcasting in the United States, Vol. II 1933-1953* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1967) and Robert W. McChesney's, *Telecommunications, Mass Media, and Democracy: The Battle for Control of U.S. Broadcasting, 1928-1935* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1993).

the public interest. We have maintained that position so far as the Agricultural College program is concerned.”⁷⁴ Much like WHA in Wisconsin, the university’s agricultural programs aired during the portion of the day when farmers were expected in “from the fields for dinner with their families.”⁷⁵ Literary reviews and political science talks therefore could not be expected to compete with the more pertinent agricultural programs offered within the time slot. Starting with three days a week, the College of Agriculture broadcast programs of interest to Kentucky’s farmers growing to claim five days of the broadcasting schedule. Programs such as “Doings of Kentucky Farm Folk,” and “What Farm Folk are Asking,” a program where Agricultural faculty answered listener inquiries aired every Wednesday and Friday; programs such as, “Engineering on the Farm,” and “Agricultural Market Review,” occurred on the first and third Mondays of the month.⁷⁶ The college also produced special programs like a radio play on farm loans staged during a “Visiting Kentucky’s Farm Folks” broadcast where businessmen, bankers, and Future Farmers of America representatives from Daviess County participated. By 1946, the College of Agriculture, through its program, “Kentuckiana Almanac,” commanded forty minutes a day, Monday through Saturday, reporting weather, “livestock, produce, and grain market quotations, [and] factual information from the University of Kentucky’s Agricultural Specialists.”⁷⁷

⁷⁴ Mark Ethridge to Frank L. McVey, September 25, 1939.

⁷⁵ Vaillant, “Your Voice Came in Last Night,” 69.

⁷⁶ “University of Kentucky Radio Programs, January, 1938 to June, 1938,” (Lexington: University of Kentucky Publicity Bureau, 1939), 1; 24.

⁷⁷ “WHAS Program Tells How Loans Help Boy Farmers,” *Courier-Journal*, April 7, 1940; Testimony of Frank H. Cooley Before the Federal Communications Commission, April 29, 1946, WHAS . . . Louisville, Kentucky, Clear Channel Hearing, Docket Number 6741, Federal Communications Commission, Washington D.C., D-3.

The agricultural programs proved so popular that WHAS decided to hire on its own Agricultural Coordinator to “further the station’s service to the agricultural population of the station.” The Farm Coordinator’s responsibility would be to:

. . . Correlate all activities of all farm organizations, farm groups, agricultural business agencies and government farm administration, so that all informational broadcasting presented over WHAS will develop the common good of the coordinating organizations and the farm population. . . . To act as information agent for the farmers and direct their problems to specialists, and to incorporate into programs all possible factual and educational information based on the needs in the field of agriculture we serve.⁷⁸

In March 1940, WHAS hired John F. Merrifield for the new position. A graduate of Iowa State College, “where he majored in Agricultural Economics, Farm Management, and Agricultural Journalism,” Merrifield brought with him experience from radio stations WLS in Chicago, WOI and WHO in Des Moines, and WLW in Cincinnati where he helped organize the Agricultural Department for the station.⁷⁹ He broadcast the program, “American Farmer” on Saturdays and helped institute the Livestock Improvement Program under the auspices of the radio station. Designed to promote the “use of better livestock, to present intelligent education toward the proper care of livestock and to place purebred livestock into the hands of persons whose ideal it is to improve the quality of livestock within their communities,” the program sponsored an essay contest, “From Feed to Food With Livestock,” that awarded purebred calves to winners.⁸⁰

After the United States entered the Second World War, Merrifield and the station received praise throughout Kentucky and Southern Indiana for aiding the war efforts of the farming community. “Farmers all over the Bourbon Stockyards area have repeatedly told me of the important part radio broadcasts from WHAS gave in their war effort,”

⁷⁸ Testimony of Frank H. Cooley, *Ibid.*, D-1, 2.

⁷⁹ “Farm Co-ordinator Appointed for WHAS,” *Courier-Journal*, March 19, 1940.

⁸⁰ “WHAS Livestock Essay Entries Are Piling Up at Increasing Pace,” *Courier-Journal*, April 27, 1941.

wrote L.F. Skellington, manager of the Livestock War Emergency Service Council at Louisville's Bourbon Stockyards.

Livestock shippers, livestock truckers, and livestock handlers have been kept closely advised of every marketing order issued, every ODT order issued, and of every price fluctuation, and have thus been able to do a more orderly job of supplying foods needed to carry on the war effort, This service does not confine itself to livestock alone; but to every agricultural community as well.⁸¹

Merrifield left WHAS in 1944 to become the farm director for the Radio Division of the Democratic National Committee.⁸²

His replacement, Frank H. Cooley helped start a program series devoted to soil conservation in December of 1945 that A.H. Ritchie of the Soil Conservation Service of Kentucky credited in helping to establish eleven new soil conservation districts within the state. A graduate of Kansas State College with a background in vocational agriculture education, Cooley oversaw the creation and distribution of a Farm Newsletter containing general information articles pertinent to farmers as well as the agricultural programming schedule of the station. Cooley also personally responded to the numerous letters WHAS received from Kentucky farmers in need of advice or assistance on topics ranging from fertilizer application and mastitis treatment for cows, to more efficient marketing for egg producers.⁸³

⁸¹ "Radio on the Farm Front," *Broadcasting*, December 14, 1942, 44.

⁸² "Reinsch Names Merrifield," *Broadcasting*, August 28, 1944, 162.

⁸³ Testimony of Frank H. Cooley, D-1. 2; D-9. No evidence of the newsletters has been found. Filed as exhibits for Cooley's testimony were the letters covering the topics mentioned as well as letters of support from the Kentucky Farm Bureau Federation, Indiana Farm Bureau, the Ohio Farm Bureau Federation, the Kentucky Department of Education, Thomas Cooper of the College of Agriculture at the University of Kentucky, and the Louisville Live Stock Exchange, among many others. All can be found in their entirety in the bound version of the proceedings available in Ekstrom Library at the University of Louisville.

The University of Kentucky Mountain Radio Listening Center System

Another element of WHAS's partnership with the University of Kentucky which received national attention was the station's participation in the university's Mountain Radio Listening Center System. Sulzer conceived of the Listening Center plan after the release of the 1930 census revealed certain counties in Kentucky lacked radios in great numbers. Elliot County reported eight receiving sets within its borders; Leslie County fared little better with eleven. During the winter and spring months these counties, and others like them in the Eastern Kentucky region, were "cut off from direct access to the outside world for days at a time." Mail service was irregular; "daily papers may arrive almost a week late, and wholesome recreation" was scarce.⁸⁴ Sulzer's idea to provide radios for these areas to help alleviate some of these problems appealed to McVey. "Many of the larger institutions of higher learning, and some of the smaller ones, are engaged in broadcasting educational programs," he wrote. And yet, "the provision for the reception and the organized hearing of these programs has not been undertaken." By completing a "circle of controlled broadcasting and reception in certain areas of Kentucky," McVey felt the university's work could prove of "distinct social significance."⁸⁵

Reception was a major factor. The divided plateau of the eastern portion of Kentucky contains "extremes of elevation to more than 2,000 feet," and in the "narrow creek-bottom valleys which contain most of the settlements, the high hills on either side

⁸⁴ Tape of Elmer Sulzer, 10; "The University of Kentucky's Mountain Radio Listening Center System," (Lexington: Publicity Bureau, University of Kentucky, 1937), 3.

⁸⁵ Frank L. McVey, Preface, "The University of Kentucky's Mountain Radio Listening Center System," 2.

have a blanketing effect on the air waves.”⁸⁶ All of the initial receiving sets provided by the University were obsolete, battery-powered, and ineffective. Some had “six to nine controls on the front,” with battery configurations that could sometimes require four to seven batteries! “Those in charge at the ‘Listening Centers,’” through negotiations with Sulzer, “agreed to be responsible for the purchase of batteries and maintenance of the sets.” The average distance from a center to a road accessible year-round was six miles, which made purchasing and recharging these batteries an arduous if not impossible task. One listening center supervisor disfigured a mule when acid from a battery spilled from a wagon the animal was pulling while negotiating a road that proved impassable.⁸⁷

Despite these obstacles, Sulzer set about establishing Listening Centers in post offices, general stores, and even the homes of those who displayed a desire to provide a public service in their communities.⁸⁸ Two young women selected from the National Youth Administration supervised each Listening Center, helping to establish listening groups that corresponded with specific programs as well as keeping the community abreast of current events that may have appealed to their interests.⁸⁹ While all radios came provided through donations, the two administration workers’ pay came through the efforts of Sulzer, who secured their salaries through the university.

Installation of the first station occurred on June 3, 1933 at Cow’s Creek to a rather raucous and bizarre reception. Accessed through a route in which “the road is in the

⁸⁶ Elmer Sulzer, “Radio For Mountains a Chinese Wall,” No Date, WHAS Archival File, Louisville, KY, 1; “The University of Kentucky’s Mountain Radio Listening Center System,” 5.

⁸⁷ Tape of Sulzer, 10; “University of Kentucky Mountain Radio Listening Center System,” 5; Sulzer, “Radio for Mountains a Chinese Wall,” 4; Elmer G. Sulzer, “The Listening Center Plan in Kentucky,” in Josephine H. MacLatchy, ed., *Education on the Air: Fifth Yearbook of the Institute for Education by Radio* (Columbus: Ohio State University Press, 1934), 151.

⁸⁸ “The main criterion was that it would be in the home or in the auspices of some prominent person.” Tape of Elmer Sulzer, 11.

⁸⁹ “University of Kentucky Mountain Radio,” 5.

creek bed half the time, and the other half the creek bed is in the road,” Sulzer and an engineer followed a guide on horseback to the area’s community center where a crowd gathered to greet them. One ninety year-old man was so excited for the event he volunteered to climb a tree and assist in setting up the receiving set’s aerial. One individual, however, would have nothing to do with the proceedings as a writer from *Forum and Century* reproduced with their best vernacular efforts: “Don’t you let ‘em fool you. Hit’s [sic] one of them gramaphones like that there Combs boy brought back with him from the level country nigh unto ten years ago. I’m a-warnin’ you. You can’t tell me that you there are pullin’ music out of the air.”⁹⁰

This kind of skepticism was not contagious and as the Listening Centers multiplied they began drawing national attention. A conference of the Listening Centers in April of 1938 brought such national figures as Judith Waller, NBC’s Director of Education, Allen Miller, director of the Chicago Broadcasting Council, and famed *Louisville Times* editor Tom Wallace to Gander, Kentucky where they listened to both complaints and praise of the system from the Centers’ supervisors. A surprising common complaint was the feeling that listeners felt “talked down to” through advertisements they heard broadcast on the radio. Not surprising were the praise handed down for agricultural programming and weather reports. “Often as I go about the community,” one supervisor reported, “I am asked for the weather report, and tobacco prices in season.”⁹¹

WHAS increased its involvement with the Listening Centers beyond that of broadcasting programs upon the United States’ entrance into the Second World War.

⁹⁰ Frances Jewell McVey, “Backwoods Kentucky Listens In,” *Forum and Century*, 92, no. 1 (July 1934), 51.

⁹¹ George T. Lamason, “Remote Hill Folk Show Preference for News on the Air,” *Broadcasting*, May 15, 1938; “University of Kentucky Mountain Radio Listening Center System,” 9.

Both the station and Sulzer acknowledged “the people in the mountains had sent far more than their quota to the wars and were anxious to find out what was happening to them.” Therefore, in April 1941, WHAS announced it would donate thirty-eight battery radio sets and two electric ones, “completely rehabilitating the system.”⁹² With gasoline rationing making travel difficult for the impoverished region, two years later WHAS presented the university with a financial gift to double the amount of Listening Centers to a total of eighty ensuring that a radio would be within three miles of every resident of Leslie and Knott Counties.⁹³

“Wake Up, Kentucky!”

These impoverished regions within Kentucky lacked more than radios. In fact, the state was lacking in many areas outside of access to new technology: the health care, education, and industrial systems within Kentucky ranked near the bottom nationally with such frequency that a number of individuals inspired to form a committee and spring into action. Testifying before the Federal Communications Commission in 1946, Harvey W. Schacter described the mission behind the Committee for Kentucky:

The “Committee for Kentucky” is a fact-finding organization, whose sole and only objective is the welfare of all of Kentucky. It has set out to find all the facts about Kentucky’s Agriculture, Education, Health, Welfare, Housing and other problems, and to disseminate these facts in the widest possible way to the people of Kentucky.⁹⁴

Results from the committee’s fact-finding missions revealed Kentucky to be “45th or 46th or 47th of the States in about every worthwhile thing in life.” According to the 1940

⁹² Tape of Sulzer, 11; “WHAS Gives U.K. New Radio Sets,” *Courier-Journal*, April 25, 1941; “Studio Notes,” *Broadcasting*, May 5, 1941, 35; Sulzer, “Radio for Mountains a Chinese Wall,” 4.

⁹³ “WHAS Gift to Kentucky U. Spreads Listening Centers,” *Broadcasting*, May 31, 1943.

⁹⁴ Testimony of Harvey W. Schacter, President, Committee for Kentucky, Before the Federal Communications Commission, April 29, 1946, WHAS . . . Louisville, Kentucky, Clear Channel Hearing, Docket Number 6741, Federal Communications Commission, Washington D.C., E-1, 2.

census, Kentucky's economy ranked a dismal forty-third; just one state [Arkansas] posted an illiteracy rate lower than that of the Commonwealth. A majority of schools had unsafe drinking water; as of 1943, two-thirds of Kentucky's farms were without electric power with 97% of farms having no indoor toilet facilities.⁹⁵

The committee looked to WHAS to be the source of disseminating these bleak facts in hopes of stirring its listeners to action toward improving the state in which they lived. The station agreed, providing the services of its script writers, radio actors, musical staff, and studio facilities free of charge. The premise of the resulting program series, "Wake Up, Kentucky!" took one or several of the statistics found by the committee and based a dramatization around them. On May 7, 1945 the first half-hour of the series aired with the opening phrase, "Say – What's wrong with My Old Kentucky Home?" which listeners came to associate with the year-long program.⁹⁶

Despite the serious nature with which WHAS and the Committee for Kentucky approached the series, to modern ears the programs can appear droll and in some cases even fatuous.⁹⁷ Regardless of present perceptions or programming tastes, "Wake Up, Kentucky!" drew attention within and outside of Kentucky garnering WHAS, in March of 1946, a special citation from the George Foster Peabody awards for outstanding regional public service. Given in recognition to those making "outstanding contributions to American radio," the Peabody awards committee chose WHAS because its program

⁹⁵ Testimony of Schacter, *ibid.*, E-3.

⁹⁶ *Ibid.*, E-4. The Louisville Free Public Library has the scripts from the entire "Wake Up, Kentucky" series in one unadorned bound collection. The volume appears to have been published by WHAS in 1946 after the series ended but no other information is available or provided within its pages which are unnumbered.

⁹⁷ One example is the May 21, 1945 program addressing the situation of inadequate toilet facilities in Kentucky. Set in a courtroom, a young woman explains to a judge that the cramped bathroom situation of her home, an apartment building where eight families share one bathroom, caused men to begin refusing picking her up for dates there. As a result, she was forced to begin "meeting men on street corners" which is, one presumes, the reason for her being before a judge.

“presented a true picture of conditions throughout the state” of Kentucky.⁹⁸ It was one of the most significant awards the station received.

Evidence involving WHAS’s foray into educational programming reveals the station’s efforts to be more than commendable. They displayed a willingness to evolve and adapt to listener wants and needs while striving to provide a quality service to its community and beyond. Despite that by 1940, “network contracts” were the “heaviest in [the] history of the station,” WHAS found avenues to provide informative programming, outside of entertainment, capable of producing a positive effect on thousands of its listeners. Although there were minor setbacks and disappointments -- the University of Louisville “voluntarily asked that the time allotment” for their programs be reduced – the station drew praise from local, regional and national authorities within education, agriculture, and government.⁹⁹ The continual stream of reinvestment ensured the station’s growth and its willingness to continue civic pursuits despite rising to profitability on the coattails of network programming is also noteworthy of praise. They assisted in cutting through the wall of isolation surrounding a significant portion of Kentucky by bringing national and international news, educational and informative programs of pertinence, and popular culture otherwise inaccessible. These efforts would be the probable legacies of the station were it not for one unfathomable disaster resulting from one unseasonably mild and rainy winter.

⁹⁸ “Peabody Honors 5; CBS,” *Broadcasting*, March 18, 1946, 17; “WHAS Citation: Peabody Recognition Given for Public Service,” *Broadcasting*, May 6, 1946, 73.

⁹⁹ “WHAS Gains Network Time But Local Features Stay,” *Courier-Journal*, September 24, 1940; Testimony of Mark Ethridge, A-6.

CHAPTER THREE

“THE CALM AND UNIMPASSIONED VOICE”

During the first half of the 1920s, providing a public service through radio was an open-ended endeavor, a fluid process molded and adapted to reflect the aspirations of station owners, their businesses, or the individuals who ran them. As seen through the efforts of WHAS, musical programming provided a public service. Many listeners viewed coverage of sporting events as a form of public service. “I don’t know any more intense interest,” Mark Ethridge commented in opening testimony before the FCC in 1946, “than that of a fan who wants to know how a football or baseball game came out.” Indeed, Sunday religious broadcasts and the cooperative effort between the station and universities throughout Kentucky in providing educational programs proved a valuable and noble public service. Yet as this chapter will show, one of the most unique and intriguing aspects within the history of WHAS is just how literal the station’s management interpreted the meaning of the phrase.

That interpretation stemmed from countless letters received by the station from grief-stricken family members. In search of lost loved ones, telephone calls and telegrams poured in from worried friends and family; concerned parents in search of missing children foreshadowed the Amber Alerts of present day. Police officials requested assistance in the capture of wayward criminals. All of these pleas for help compelled Credo Harris to offer up the microphone and transmitter of WHAS for real

actual service to the community. The same time period witnessed an increase in news over the radio as burgeoning developments in broadcast journalism began. Provoking the ire of the newspaper press bureaus that were helpless to stunt its growth, news reporting evolved into one of the most crucial elements in the entirety of the broadcasting industry. Episodes of crises -- ranging from the small, individual plight of trapped cave explorer Floyd Collins in 1925 to that of a much grander scale with the Ohio River Flood in January 1937 -- helped WHAS define itself beyond the limitations of the entertainment format into something more: an outlet for the development and evolution of the human-interest story, the dissemination of news and information, and as a beacon of public service to its listeners throughout Louisville, Kentucky and beyond.

“Paging the Ether”

Beginning January 1, WHAS . . . will -- in case of emergency -- ‘page’ persons whose families desire to reach them. Only cases of extreme emergency will be the cause of the broadcast. In this way the station said it wishes to add to its list of services to radio fans.¹

With that announcement in the newspapers on Christmas Eve 1922, WHAS poised itself to reveal another aspect of the “penetrating, all-reaching power of radio.” Calling it, “Paging the Ether,” when solicited, Harris would announce, free of charge, the name, general descriptive information, and last-known whereabouts of any individual or individuals sought out by their families or loved ones. In outstanding circumstances, Harris negotiated with surrounding stations for the information to be re-broadcast so as to further widen the area of coverage. The station encouraged those with information to phone or wire collect. The logic behind such a selfless service was simple: radio had the unique ability of being anywhere and everywhere, a quality that allowed it into locations

¹ “WHAS Will Start New Year by Paging Persons in Emergency,” *Courier-Journal*, December 24, 1922.

“individual searchers would not have thought to look.” To increase the efficacy of the announcements, certain outstanding instances received front-page treatment in the newspaper. The results it produced were both fascinating and bizarre, which more than anything, humbled Harris before the presence of “an invention” he felt more and more approached “the solemnity of a divine miracle.”²

One amazing example occurred after a father in Russellville, Kentucky wrote in requesting WHAS to broadcast a message for his son, Dan. The father had not seen or heard from Dan for more than a year and, concerned for his well-being, looked to the station as a last resort in establishing contact with him or learning of his whereabouts. Harris agreed to announce Dan’s description over the air because his father’s writing “indicated age and effort.” The message went out and weeks went by without notice or update. It was not until a small but excited letter from the father revealed that Dan had been found and was coming home. The father explained his son was aboard a freighter out on the Pacific Ocean and sent word by postcard once his ship was safe at harbor. This brief tidbit intrigued Harris so much he brought Dan into the station to tell his story once he arrived back in Kentucky.³

Seated in the forecastle of a steamer ship two hundred miles off the coast of Cape Blanco, Oregon, with earphones attached and plugged in to the vessel’s radio, the ship’s captain heard a mysterious message from a distant radio station. Mesmerized by what he heard the captain called in one of his crew members from below deck to inform him that, over the radio, he had heard the crew member’s father in Kentucky was looking for him and he was to contact him upon making landfall. Astonished, the young man returned to

² Harris, 134-137; *Courier-Journal*, December 24, 1922.

³ Harris, 134-135.

his cohorts convinced their captain was delusional. That member was Dan and it is uncertain whether the broadcast the captain heard originated from WHAS or elsewhere. Nevertheless, Dan did as instructed and father and son reunited several weeks later.⁴

An even more unbelievable result from WHAS's "Paging the Ether" came in 1924 and the search for Gustav Salomez. A native of Roubais, France, Salomez had not been seen or heard from by his family for almost four decades after a "slight contretemps with a lady friend" resulted in his jailing. A descendant of the Sieur de Joinville, he fled his native country upon his release and his family believed him to be dead or too ashamed to return. The death of his brother, Emile, however, put pressure on the necessity to locate Gustav -- now the heir to an approximate one million francs inheritance from his deceased parents. His brother's last will and testament stipulated if Gustav could not be found within seven years of his death, the inheritance would be divided between Emile's son and one surviving brother, Henri. Emile's son, Jean, Gustav's nephew, took it upon himself to travel the world in search of the uncle he had never met. Adding a degree of skepticism to the search and its result, Jean happened to have settled in Louisville while chasing the many empty leads of his uncle's whereabouts. After receiving word of WHAS's paging service, the nephew showed up in Harris's office in late January.⁵

While he agreed to make the announcement for Salomez, Harris warned the young man that making such a statement of an unclaimed fortune over the air carried potential consequences. The events leading to Gustav's disappearance happened almost

⁴ *Ibid.*, 134-135; Ladd, "Catwhiskers and Static." It must be noted that no evidence of this event has been found besides Harris's memoir or Ladd's account while commemorating the station's 25th anniversary. The *Courier-Journal* index begins in 1924 therefore, due to time constraints, the paper's entire 1923 run -- the year the event is believed to have taken place -- could not be examined in full.

⁵ "WHAS Aids in World-Wide Hunt for \$1,000,000 Heir," *Courier-Journal*, January 26, 1924; Harris, 143-144. It is humorous to observe that after almost two years in radio, Harris was still apt to put the estimate of responses at such a low number as fifty.

forty years ago. “Why, you could have fifty octogenarians crashing your gates for that fortune,” Harris cautioned the young man. The Frenchman assured Harris he would be able to identify his uncle by a small secret mark given to all male members of his family. Broadcasting the announcement, Harris escorted the man to the offices of the newspapers for further assistance with his search and left him there to return to the studio. No sooner than a one day after the broadcast and newspaper story, the studio’s phone rang in the lobby.⁶

Listening to WHAS in her home in Middlesboro, KY near the Tennessee state line, Mrs. J.N. Nuckols heard Credo Harris make the plea for any information concerning the missing uncle. She thought Harris’s description matched that of a Frenchman she and her husband knew who lived on the Bell County Poor Farm eleven miles away. They knew him as Steve White, an old man with a reputation for spinning tall tales of adventure who alluded to a fortune awaiting his return to France. The following morning, after reading the *Courier’s* front page article on the search, Nuckols visited White and asked if he could identify the figures in the photographs accompanying the story. White identified the photos of his deceased mother, his brother, Henri, and a young photograph of himself. He asked Nuckols to keep his identity a secret, however, after conferring with her husband once he had arrived home from work, Nuckols decided to phone WHAS. The couple admitted the idea of Steve White being Gustav Salomez sounded far-fetched, but phoned the studio anyway because, they thought, “you never can tell.” The nephew boarded a train for Middlesboro the following day to investigate with a *Courier* reporter and photographer following in hopes of capturing a human interest story. Upon meeting Jean, White was defiant and refused to answer questions, skeptical

⁶ Harris, 144-145.

the young man was not who he said he was. It was the younger Salomez's mention of the family's mark that convinced White of his nephew's authenticity, leading him to admit he was indeed Gustav Salomez. From there, the elder Salomez told a spectacular story of how after fleeing France, he joined the British Navy then Army, treasure hunted in Brazil and dug for diamonds in South Africa, before drifting to the United States and later moving on to the Southern Kentucky poor farm on his own accord. For their assistance, the Nuckols received a reward and the young nephew packed up his uncle and took him back to France.⁷

The reporter got his human interest story and Salomez's success through WHAS increased the number of messages and visitors to the studio. "It became simply appalling to realize how many boys and girls had run away," Harris remembered. The radio did its best to help find them all. A young boy of divorced parents skipped school in Louisville and started off towards Arenzville, Illinois, where his mother resided. After his father's message broadcast from WHAS, a woman from Scottsburg, Indiana phoned the station to notify all concerned that the boy was in her possession. She had taken him in earlier that afternoon after she saw him wandering through town on his own.⁸ More heirs to lingering fortunes were found; more loved ones reunited in times of absolute necessity. Through another WHAS broadcast an attorney in Sapulpa, Oklahoma helped reunite a

⁷ Grace Rutherford, "WHAS Finds Heir to Million on Bell Poor Farm After 36 Years," *Courier-Journal*, February 2, 1924. Salomez claimed an old woman who rented him a room in Texas gave him the name Steenie White. "He kept the White because it was her name and he liked her, but he changed the 'Steenie' to Steve, because he feared she had named him after a woman." Harris, 145-146. It must be noted that although the almost four, full-length column story is ripe with details no follow-up story exists. Rutherford mentioned the validity of the family mark had yet to be tested and made light of White's hesitancy to return to France. We are left to surmise that White was Salomez, despite the almost too-coincidental and fantastical nature of the story.

⁸ Harris, 166; "WHAS Finds Boy, 13, Missing From Home Since Wednesday," *Courier-Journal*, December 21, 1924.

ranch hand with his elderly parents in Louisville who had not seen their son in twenty-four years.⁹

Harris also extended the microphone to the city police department and other law enforcement officials. In the beginning of February 1923, Chief of Louisville Police, Colonel Forrest Braden, praised WHAS's assistance in the recovery of all automobiles reported stolen the previous month.¹⁰ In typical fashion, Harris envisioned WHAS branching out to provide twenty-four hour assistance to the police department and citizens across Louisville. As a guest speaker at an Electric Club luncheon in the Henry Watterson Hotel, Harris explained his latest vision for radio: "WHAS is now working on a plan whereby an electric net may be spread over an area of fifty miles, making it virtually impossible for automobile bandits, distillery or bank hold-up gangs to operate successfully in Louisville." This electric net, he explained, would comprise of coherer tubes connected to electric bell alarms spread throughout strategic points in the city. Once activated by a radio signal, the tube would set off the alarm notifying unaware persons to turn on their radios for important announcements. This lofty vision was never enacted due to technological limitations and expense. Furthermore, with the effectiveness of short-wave radio transmission improving, the city police department acquired their own means of radio communication by early next decade.¹¹

⁹ "Another 'Lost Heir' is Found by WHAS; Will Share in Estate," *Courier-Journal*, December 22, 1924; "WHAS Finds Man 'Lost' Two Years," *Courier-Journal*, April 19, 1925; "WHAS Finds Man Missing From Kentucky Home for 24 Years," *Courier-Journal*, January 10, 1925. Although news stories thinned out concerning the "paging the Ether" service, as late as 1948, WHAS still allowed the use of its microphone to aid in locating missing persons. *Broadcasting* reported that in November 1948, WHAS helped locate a missing doctor from Beckley, West Virginia. He was traveling to see a friend in Kentucky when a death in his family occurred. The Missing Persons Bureau and Police Headquarters turned to WHAS for help in finding him which it did in a matter of hours after its initial SOS broadcast. "Finds Missing Man," *Broadcasting*, November 15, 1948, 113.

¹⁰ "WHAS Thanked for Aid to the Police," *Courier-Journal*, February 2, 1923.

¹¹ "Radio's Future Told by WHAS Director," *Courier-Journal*, February 6, 1923; Harris 140-141.

Trapped!

The discoveries of missing persons from all portions of the country -- on account of the far-reaching power of the radio -- fascinated people. They devoured stories printed in the newspapers and listened in a combined state of wonder, concern, and anticipation whenever a new announcement occurred. At their core, these were profound messages of human interest and represented a diffusive power where, bit by bit, the new medium engendered an element of uniformity into the human experience unlike anything before it in history.¹² Outside of political and sporting events, however, radio had yet to demonstrate its unprecedented power to grab the full attention of the entire nation. This situation changed one morning in late January 1925 when Floyd Collins, an amateur spelunker from Cave City, Kentucky, crawled through the small opening of a cave on a farm near his home and failed to return that evening.

On January 30, Collins had set out to continue his explorations for what he hoped was a new caving system. A co-owner of Crystal Cave along with his father, Lee, the younger Collins found his calling after discovering and exploring the cavern on his family's property the decade previous. Sand Cave, as it was called, was to be a new venture of his own making. After spending the early morning exploring, Collins made preparations to exit through a treacherous narrow shaft, requiring one to crawl upon entering and exiting. While ascending a steep wall, a small cave-in dislodged a boulder

¹² In 1933, W.F. Ogburn and S.C. Gilfillan composed a list of 150 positive and negative influences the radio was having on American society. The first grouping in the list concentrated on Uniformity and Diffusion claiming radio increased "Homogeneity of peoples . . . because of liked stimuli." Furthermore, "regional differences in cultures became less pronounced," and "distinctions between social classes and economic groups lessened," all due to the instantaneousness of radio broadcasting. W.F. Ogburn and S.C. Gilfillan, *Recent Trends in the United States*, (New York: McGraw-Hill Book Co., 1933), 148-165. Quoted in Lawrence W. Lichty and Malachi C. Topping, eds., *American Broadcasting: A Source Book on the History of Radio and Television* (New York: Hastings House Publishers, 1976), 473.

pinning his foot and half-burying the man under a mound of dirt and gravel. The disruption had broken his lantern leaving him in pitch-black darkness over eighty feet below the surface where he shouted himself hoarse to no avail. Not long after his discovery the following morning, a small crowd of curious and concerned onlookers began gathering. From the party line of the local telephones, news spread to Louisville where the *Courier-Journal* made its first report on Sunday, February 1. By Monday, news of Collins's entrapment went national.¹³

By Wednesday, February 4, Collins's plight was a sensation throughout the country. WHAS aired eight "spot" bulletins on Collins that day and continued to do so throughout the rescue effort. The reports' details came direct from the scene through William 'Skeets' Miller, a twenty-one year old reporter for the *Courier-Journal* who had arrived in Cave City on assignment from the paper's city editor, Neil Dalton. Miller was a small man, weighing less than one hundred twenty pounds and stood just five feet, five inches tall. He took up the challenge to speak to Floyd himself after Homer Collins, Floyd's younger brother, refused to answer any further questions concerning his brother's well-being. The reporter's size allowed him to navigate with ease down to Collins and he became the dying man's voice to the outside world, both in print and radio. Day after day, people poured over their newspapers and turned on their radios for any word, as rescue efforts started then stalled, began under a different strategy only to stop and switch to yet another. By Saturday, February 7 radio stations such as KPO in San Francisco began their broadcast day by soliciting prayers from its listeners for Collins' safe rescue.

¹³ "Cave-In Pins Man Supine in Cavern," *Courier-Journal*, February 1, 1925; "Landslide Trap A Kentucky Cave Owner; 200 Men Work Vainly 36 hours to Free Him," *The New York Times*, February 2, 1925, 1; "Collin's Story of Five Days," *The New York Times*, February 5, 1925, 2; Robert K Murray and Roger W. Brucker, *Trapped! The Story of Floyd Collins*, Revised Edition Lexington: The University Press of Kentucky, 1982), 57.

A church in Battle Creek, Michigan held a special prayer service for the man and even that small tidbit made it into *The New York Times*.¹⁴

“Miller’s reporting of Floyd Collins’ own words,” Kay F. Reinartz wrote in her article, “Floyd Collins, Hero of Sand Cave,” “helped the public to identify with him as a living man helplessly trapped and totally alone in a dark, wet, cold, underground prison.” His humbleness towards his sudden fame and his thanks for prayers from strangers he would never meet “drew Americans to the man.” *The Independent* described the public’s fascination in another light: “In their imagination, the American people [were] lying there in that dark tunnel, alone, shut off from life and light, cold, dying, pinned down by pitiless earth.” The public’s interest was not one of humanity, the magazine argued, but rather the “interest of an emotional audience viewing a drama of life and death in which the suspense is abnormally prolonged. As long as the final catastrophe of the drama is in doubt, the public’s interest is unabated.”¹⁵

The media firestorm exposed a macabre element of the public’s curiosity. Cave City turned into an overnight boomtown and a carnival and picnic atmosphere took over the farm where rescue efforts were still ongoing. Vendors, profiteers, and even medicine men, showed up in droves to make a dollar off of Collins’s ordeal. “Tiny hamburger steaks sold for 25 cents,” *The New York Times* reported. “Rooming houses – the hotels

¹⁴ Murray and Bruckner, *Trapped!*, 71-75, 156. Murray and Bruckner make an interesting observation concerning the timing of Collins’ accident. It occurred in winter which afforded more time to concentrate on newspapers and radio. Furthermore, there was no significant news happening on a local, regional, national, or international level that could compete with such a human interest story as that of Floyd Collins. William Burke “Skeets” Miller, “C-J Man Leads Three Rescue Attempts,” *Courier-Journal*, February 4, 1925; “Human Chain Helps Loosen Prisoner Down in Kentucky Cave,” *The New York Times*, February 4, 1925. Miller got his nickname because he was “no bigger than a mosquito.”

¹⁵ Kay F. Reinartz, “Floyd Collins, Hero of Sand Cave,” in Bruce Sloane ed., *Cavers, Caves and Caving* (New Brunswick: Rutgers University Press, 1977), 231; No Author, “A Long Drama,” *The Independent (1922-1928)*, February 21, 1925, 114, Iss. no. 3899, 198.

having long since used the last cot – charge \$2 for a 75 cent room.” Collins’s own father even participated in the chicanery by passing out brochures to Crystal Cave. “He would like [the crowd] to visit the cave at \$2 a visit, and many do.”¹⁶ Rescuers reached the imprisoned Collins on February 16, eighteen days after he first went underground. Sometime in the previous 48 hours, Collins had expired succumbing to a gruesome combination of dehydration, starvation, and exposure. Audiences would have to look “wearily away for the next sensation,” as the plight of the trapped explorer was “no longer news.” For his part, Miller received a Pulitzer Prize in Journalism and \$1,000 for the “best example of a reporter’s work . . . the test being strict accuracy, terseness, [and] the accomplishment of some public good commanding public attention and respect.” He left the *Courier-Journal* in mid-1925 to pursue other ventures concluding an unsatisfactory stint in real estate with an audition at NBC’s WEAJ in New York the following year. NBC hired him on as a radio announcer.¹⁷

The Press-Radio War

The reports of Floyd Collins’s struggle marked the first significant collaboration between the press and radio on a national level. With the onset of the Great Depression into the following decade, this congenial and cooperative relationship deteriorated into one of jealousy, animosity, and fear. Between 1929 and 1931, “radio enjoyed a 90 percent increase in advertising revenues . . . while newspaper advertising sales dropped dramatically.” By 1937, the newspaper industry witnessed a 25 percent overall decline in

¹⁶ “10,000 Visit Cave and Picnic on Scene of Collins Tragedy,” *The New York Times*, February 9, 1925, 1. Among photos from Cave City comprising a full page in the February 15 issue of *The Times*, is one of a crowd among tents of vendors and cars parked in disarray.

¹⁷ “Discovery a Surprise,” *The New York Times*, February 17, 1925, 1; “A Long Drama,” 198; “Pulitzer Prizes Awarded for 1925,” *The New York Times*, May 4, 1926, 8; “Prize Reporter Seeks Radio Announcer Job,” *The New York Times*, June 8, 1926, 22.

advertising revenue while in the same eight-year period radio revenue increased by 263 percent. Compounding matters further, since radio broadcasting's beginning in the United States, newspapers published "radio programs free of charge through listings and radio columns," and provided "news material free of charge for news broadcasts" as well.¹⁸ "By the early thirties," Barry Bingham recalled, "there was a great feeling that radio was going to take all the advertising away from us and that we would be on our knees." Within WHAS and the offices of the Louisville newspapers, "the salesmen sold against each other awfully strongly – the newspaper salesmen and the radio salesmen. There was almost a bitter rivalry between them."¹⁹ Chief Technician Orrin W. Towner recalled many *Courier-Journal* reporters refused to have a radio in their homes well into the 1940s for fear of contaminating their journalistic integrity.²⁰

The publicity spectacle surrounding the 1932 kidnapping of Charles Lindbergh's young son proved the final straw for many publishers. Stations across the country forfeited valuable airtime to aid in the investigation and disseminated, as best they could, facts from fiction that sprang forth from endless torrents of mail and telephone calls which jammed their lines.²¹ It was the first national human interest sensation since the Collins incident, this time involving a beloved national figure. Orrin E. Dunlap, Jr. of *The New York Times* concluded, however, that reports on the kidnapping gave stations "some new thoughts on news broadcasting" realizing "that such a prolonged event

¹⁸ McChesney, *Telecommunications, Mass Media, and Democracy*, 165; Stamm, *Sound Business*, 62-63; Barnouw, *The Golden Web*, 18.

¹⁹ Bingham interview.

²⁰ Orrin W. Towner, interviewed by Terry L. Birdwhistell, Louisville, Kentucky, August 11, 1980, History of Broadcasting in Kentucky Collection, Margaret I. King Library, University of Kentucky, Lexington, Kentucky.

²¹ "Kidnapping Holds First Place on Radio; Stations Flooded With Pleas for News," *The New York Times*, March 4, 1932, 8.

belongs to the press more than to the radio.” NBC alone spent \$2,800 a day for on-location news updates and staff maintenance, a charge that press bulletins could have reduced.²² Dunlap’s observation did little to console publishers who fumed over the new medium’s coverage. Radio spot bulletins undermined sales of their newspapers’ printed extras and radio announcers, “selected for voice quality and program skill,” disgraced the art of news reporting by broadcasting sensational stories that pandered to the emotional sympathies of their audiences.²³

“Oddly enough it is not advertising revenue they are going to fight over,” *Harper’s* reported, “at least the billboards say it is a principle and not a purse which is at stake.”

They are coming to blows over the privilege of telling you and me what happened to-day in Tokio [sic] and Timbuctoo and New York City; over the right to recount what the President plans to tell Congress and what the captain of the lightship said to the captain of the liner who sank his craft. They are going to fight, in brief, over the privilege of purveying the news.²⁴

The American Newspaper Publishers Association was the most vocal of critics decrying as early as 1931 that “radio broadcasters are competing on an unfair basis with newspapers in many departments, including news, editorials, features, and advertising.”²⁵ By 1933, its members agreed to no longer publish radio program logs free of charge. Following suit, the Associated Press, the United Press, and the International News Service would no longer provide news bulletins to radio stations free of charge. Rather

²² Orrin E. Dunlap, Jr., “Listening In,” *The New York Times*, March 13, 1932.

²³ Stamm, 63-64; Hilmes, ed., *Only Connect*, 99.

²⁴ Isabelle Keating, “Pirates of the Air,” *Harper’s Magazine*, Vol. 169, (September 1934), 463.

²⁵ “Publishers See Need for Curb on Radio,” *The New York Times*, April 23, 1931, 14.

than fight the organizations through legal action, radio stations and networks started their own news departments.²⁶

In December 1933, at the Hotel Biltmore in New York City, members of the AP, UP, INS, and ANPA met with representatives from NBC, CBS and the National Association of Broadcasters. Members attending the meeting at the Biltmore looked upon the negotiations as somewhat of a truce. CBS and NBC agreed to suspend their news services; the press agencies would supply the networks with enough material to comprise two five-minute broadcasts per day, aired once in the morning and once during the evening. A Press-Radio Bureau, born out of the negotiations, would act as an advisory council although its rules proved unenforceable. Almost from the beginning a breakdown in cooperation occurred as entrepreneurs formed their own news agencies to supply material exclusively to radio stations.²⁷

According to media historian Michael Stamm, another reason the Biltmore Agreement never gained purchase resulted from the numerous objections by newspapers and their publishers whose investments in radio, like those of Robert W. Bingham of the *Courier Journal* and *The Louisville Times*, amounted to a small fortune. Prominent figures such as Joseph Pulitzer believed that the public looked to a newspaper's radio station for up-to-the-minute reports and the newspaper itself for an account of events in full-detail. "As the radio beats the newspaper extra in speed, accuracy, and public convenience," Pulitzer wrote to L.K. Nicholson of the *New Orleans Times-Picayune*, "the newspaper had better utilize the radio and not permit someone else to make use of it and

²⁶ Barnouw, *The Golden Web*, 18-20.

²⁷ *Ibid.*, 20-22.

beat the newspaper.”²⁸ To their benefit, neither the *Courier* nor *The Louisville Times* ceased printing any of the program logs for WHAS or regional stations.²⁹ The “Press-Radio War” amounted to little more than a futile effort by publishers to exert their control over the dissemination of information. If they needed an example of the futility of their efforts in the face of radio’s efficacy, one arrived in the cold, wet January of 1937.

“This Ain’t Nothing But a Heavy Dew”

If such an event as that of a perfect storm exists in nature, then the meteorological events of late December 1936 into January 1937 became as close a representation as any in modern times.

Geological evidence and all known records go to prove that people who witnessed Louisville’s 1937 flood saw the greatest volume of water sweeping across the region that has gone over it at any one time since the glacial thawing ceased many thousands of years ago.³⁰

A swirling high-pressure system, full of warm moisture rose out of the Gulf of Mexico to meet a dry, cold front sweeping down across the Midwest from the polar reaches of Canada. The two fronts collided over the Ohio Valley creating a low-pressure trough above the area that channeled moisture “like a giant vacuum.” Releasing deluges in four stages, communities along the Ohio River saw anywhere from ten to fifteen inches of rainfall; in other regions, as much as twenty five inches of rain, sleet, and snow fell from the sky. Little opportunity existed for ground absorption owing to the many outlying tributaries which filled with lightning rapidity and pushed their muddy, debris-laden

²⁸ Quoted in Stamm, 65.

²⁹ Bingham interview.

³⁰ Richard Renneisen, “The Flood Ten Years Ago Today,” *Courier-Journal Sunday Magazine*, January 26, 1947, 6.

payloads into the mighty Ohio. Temperatures hovering just above freezing added further injury to the epic insult of the swollen river.³¹

“So vivid is the recollection of last summer’s drouth [sic] that few have been impressed with the rain,” wrote Dr. Frank H. Caldwell, president of the Louisville Presbyterian Theological Seminary.³² Radio and newspaper reports of a rising river did little to stir worry in anyone within the city. “Probably the people down on ‘the Point’ might be driven out,” Caldwell presumed, referencing the seedy, once-prominent area to the east of downtown, filled with shotgun houses and shanty boats and prone to flooding; such occurrences happened “once or twice every year.”³³ The apathy shining through the professor’s observations helps establish a foundation for the crisis that ensued: a rising Ohio River was – as it remains today -- nothing more than a seasonal inconvenience for many; a flooded basement or an alternate route into work being the common sources for complaint. On occasion there arose instances of emergency such as the great flood of 1884 or the spring flood of 1913. Therefore, by the middle of January 1937, many in Louisville did not realize the impending danger the river posed until the danger had already arrived, lapping at their doorstep, submerging their property under pools of imperceptible depth, and raging into channels that cut off access to areas outside of the city’s limits. In light of the destruction that unfolded, events locked themselves into place presenting the perfect opportunity for radio to transcend its by-then-cemented place as an outlet for entertainment into one of true utilitarian purpose and public necessity.

³¹ David Welky, *The Thousand-Year Flood: The Ohio-Mississippi Disaster of 1937* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 2011), 59-60. Remarkably, Welky’s appears to be the only major comprehensive work done on the flooding disaster. “Clash of Air Masses is Blamed for Flood,” *The New York Times*, January 26, 1937, 15; Renneisen, “The Flood Ten Years Ago,” 6.

³² Frank H. Caldwell, “Notes on the Louisville Flood,” Louisville Free Public Library, 1937 Flood Reports no. 12, 1.

³³ Caldwell, “Notes on the Louisville Flood,” 1; John E. Kleber, ed., *The Encyclopedia of Louisville* (Lexington: The University Press of Kentucky, 2001), 710.

It was not, however, an unprecedented position for radio to be in at the time. In 1927 Herbert Hoover utilized the medium he helped to foster in aiding rescue efforts throughout the flooded Mississippi Delta region.³⁴ In March 1936, stations across New England suspended their regular programming to aid in the rescue and relief efforts stemming from the flooding of the Merrimac, Connecticut, and Monongahela Rivers. “Flood waters born out of a seven-inch rainfall on three to five feet of snow in Northern New England reached the lower reaches of the section’s great rivers,” claiming upwards of thirty lives and conflicting damages in totals upwards of \$50,000,000.³⁵ Stations such as WFEA in Manchester, New Hampshire; WEEI in Boston, WCAE in Pittsburgh, and WFBR and WBAL in Baltimore, among others, sent radio operators out into the field on foot, cars, trucks and boats. Station officials worked alongside “town or city officials, newspapers, police departments, the National Guard, the American Legion, the Red Cross, and other relief organizations.” The efforts of these stations were vital to those in the surrounding areas and displayed a “splendid opportunity for a real public service.” National press coverage was minimal, however. Furthermore, the Merrimac was not the Ohio, neither were the Connecticut and Monongahela Rivers. Whether WHAS staff was aware of such efforts by their radio brethren is unknown. Nevertheless, these stations established a template which WHAS drew from and branched out of as the crisis unfolded.³⁶

The first major rain in Louisville came over the weekend of January 9-10. A forecast of cold, rain, and sleet, with the possibility of snow, unleashed close to two

³⁴ See *The New York Times*’ coverage throughout May 1927.

³⁵ “Flood Toll to 29; New England Loss Put at \$50,000,000,” *The New York Times*, March 14, 1936, 1.

³⁶ No Author, “Floods! . . . and How the Broadcasters Came to the Rescue,” *Pick-Ups*, 2, no. 2 (May 1936), 3; 22-25. *Pick-Ups* was a magazine produced by Western Electric which had a limited run in the 1930s.

inches of precipitation to no one's concern; it was a continuation of the pattern of weather that had hovered over the region since Christmas. When 2.71 inches of rain fell the following Thursday, there was still no cause for alarm. As expected, poorer citizens within the Point and Shippingport made preparations to evacuate. Located to the west, Shippingport, an original settlement near Louisville, was once a peninsula jutting out to the falls of the river before construction of the Louisville and Portland Canal in 1825 transformed the small community into an island. Much like the Point, its cousin to the east, Shippingport was a place of disrepute, filled with shacks and other make-shift shelters which bore the brunt of damage occurring from any rise in the river.³⁷

Thursday's rain pushed the swollen river into summer retreat camps along Upper River Road, blocking passage on the route farther down from Fourth to Sixth Streets as all surrounding creeks swelled beyond their normal capacities. Meteorologist J.L. Kendall predicted a thirty-foot flood crest for the weekend as the river brushed up against the flood stage level of twenty-eight feet. Sunday, January 17, 1.46 inches of rain fell helping the river meet Kendall's prediction. By Monday, portions of Shippingport, Portland, River Road, and Shawnee and Cherokee Parks were submerged. Access to West Point, KY was cut-off; U.S. 31-W rested nine feet under water at certain parts. Officials at Ballard High School made the executive decision to close the school's doors until further notice as Lime Kiln Road at River Road became impassable.³⁸

³⁷ Willard Rouse Jillson, *The Great Flood of 1937 in Louisville, Kentucky* (Louisville: The Standard Printing Co., 1937), 8-10; Kleber, ed., *The Encyclopedia of Louisville*, 814.

³⁸ W.O. Carver, Jr., "The Log of the January Flood of 1937," no date, no name of publication, Neville Miller Scrapbook #14, Neville Miller Papers, 1912-1975 (bulk 1933-1937), Filson Historical Society, Louisville, KY. Judging by the font, the Log looks to be from *The Louisville Times*; Jillson, *The Great Flood of 1937*, 12.

Even news of these developments failed to cause alarm. “It had been raining and raining,” remembered one individual. “We heard of Shippingport’s overflow but thought nothing of it.”³⁹ WHAS station announcer, Foster Brooks paid little attention to refugees pouring out from the Point because “the river was always high that time of year.”⁴⁰ Noting Beargrass Creek’s domination of Broadway at Baxter Avenue on Wednesday, Caldwell showed little more than annoyance at the water’s increasing presence. “Thursday, January 21, Eastern Parkway was flooded, leaving only Kentucky, Ellison, and Baxter Avenue (fording necessary at Baxter) as traffic outlets to the Highlands,” he wrote. On the radio that afternoon, Caldwell heard Mayor Neville Miller make “an appeal to people to take in refugees from the west-end of the city, but I thought he was exaggerating the situation.”⁴¹

Up until that time, WHAS proceeded with its normal broadcasting schedule. Through continual reinvestment in the maintenance and upkeep of its facilities, the station had become a powerhouse, employing a staff far beyond that of its original three. Running throughout the studios and offices on any given day were more than forty people consisting of directors, commercial and program managers, announcers, actors, technicians, and musicians -- including a staff orchestra – as well as continuity writers and assistants. The station could be heard throughout the eastern half of the United States, thanks to a Western Electric 306-A transmitter broadcasting with 50,000 watts power from their plant in Jeffersontown. The upgrade was the last in a quick succession of improvements beginning in 1931 with the introduction of 100-percent crystal

³⁹ No Author, “My Experiences With the Flood of January 1937: Rose Hudson Community Center,” Louisville Free Public Library, 1937 Flood Reports no. 15, 1.

⁴⁰ Daniel Rubin, “Foster Brooks Recalls Work as Broadcaster During Flood,” *Courier-Journal*, February 4, 1987, B1.

⁴¹ Caldwell, 1.

modulation, which added a twenty-five percent increase in the signal strength of its then-10,000-watt RCA transmitter; 1932 saw the installation of the new Western Electric transmitter and a power increase from 10,000 to 25,000 watts. In late November 1933, testimony before the Federal Radio Commission from Harris, commercial manager, Lee Coulson, educational figures such as Elmer Sulzer from the University of Kentucky and Rev. Newton King from Asbury Theological Seminary secured WHAS the authority to increase its transmitting power to 50,000 watts where it remained a clear-channel station broadcasting on 820 kilocycles through the next decade.⁴²

The station's first significant flood notification came on Thursday, January 21 at 11:29am between the *Melodies and Moods* and *The Romance of Helen Trent* programs:

A warning just received from the Louisville weather bureau says: the Ohio Valley is facing the most alarming flood we have ever had on the Ohio River. If this rain should continue another twenty-four hours – which it doubtless will – the greatest flood in the history of the Ohio River and its tributaries is imminent. Warning! Hold yourselves in readiness to move to higher ground on a moment's notice – and if the water is near any of your houses in lowlands move out before nightfall!⁴³

If anything, this announcement only served to pique the curiosity of many. People travelled around the city to high water sites just to see “what was going on.” Helen Ginther and her boyfriend drove to Jeffersonville and just missed being trapped by waters rushing through the town's broken levee. Once back across, they continued driving around the West-End finding the river at Thirty-Sixth and Western Parkway.⁴⁴

⁴² Baysinger, “65 Years of Service,” 2; Harris, 274; J. Kenneth Jones, “They Also Served . . .,” Louisville Free Public Library, 1937 Flood Reports no. 19, 2; “New Equipment of WHAS Ready,” *Courier-Journal*, September 27, 1931; “WHAS on Air With 25,000 Watts Power,” *Courier-Journal*, October 5, 1932; “WHAS Power Raise is Seen,” *Courier-Journal*, November 23, 1933; “WHAS is to Become 50,000-Watt Station,” *Courier-Journal*, December 1, 1933.

⁴³ Harris, 275; Neville Miller Scrapbook, 1937 Ohio River Flood Collection, University of Louisville Special Collections, Louisville, KY quoted in Welky, *The Thousand-Year Flood*, 124.

⁴⁴ Helen Girther, “The Hospital in the Police Station,” Story Eight in *Flood Stories by Shawnee High School Girls, Louisville, Kentucky, 1937* (Louisville: Standard Printing Co., 1937), 28.

Another citizen interested in getting a glimpse was Brooks. Born in Louisville in 1912, Foster Brooks made his debut on WHAS at the age of thirteen, performing with his mother who made frequent appearances over the station's airwaves. He auditioned for several network affiliates in Chicago, singing and performing impressions to no avail and arrived at the offices of WHAS in early 1933 a dejected young man. Lead announcer Pete Monroe had him audition alongside staff pianist Joe Pierson and liked the combination so much he had Brooks hired for the purpose of the two forming a harmony duo. By January 1937, he was announcing the Bulova watch time during station breaks for \$20 a week keeping staff on their toes with frequent hijinks when not behind the microphone. All of the reports trickling into the station inspired Brooks to grab Monroe and the two went out to see the river for themselves.⁴⁵

After purchasing rubber hip boots and galoshes from the Sears and Roebuck department store, Monroe drove the pair to Portland where the sight of a family standing on the porch of their house with water not less than a foot from their front steps left the two men awestruck and inspired them to call into the station. From a pay phone within a nearby grocery store, Monroe had engineers at WHAS patch the line direct in to the control board and reported on the air what the men were seeing. Brooks recalled inviting people to come down and see the incredible sights for themselves. The first visitor arriving at their invitation was none other than Mayor Neville Miller.⁴⁶ Scolding the two men for their irresponsibility, Miller grabbed the phone and broadcast a message

⁴⁵ Kleber, ed., *The Encyclopedia of Louisville*, 131; "Combination Proves Lucky," *Courier-Journal*, April 30, 1933; Rubin, "Foster Brooks Recalls," B4. This Foster Brooks is the same Foster Brooks who rose to fame as the "Lovable Lush" character in the 1960s and 1970s gaining notoriety through his appearances on the shows of Steve Allen and Dean Martin. See Thomas J. Lueck, "Foster Brooks, 89, Comedian Known for His Tippy Persona," *The New York Times*, December 24, 2001, F6.

⁴⁶ Rubin, "Foster Brooks Recalls," B4.

requesting cooperation from all citizens. An emergency flood committee was assembling and the National Guard and Jeffersonville Quartermaster were ready to lend their support. He then entered a plea for calm and described the plight of West-End evacuees seeking refuge that Frank Caldwell and many others remembered hearing across the city.⁴⁷

To the efforts of Monroe and Brooks, Harris dispatched additional pairs of crews - an announcer and engineer in each -- across the city to report on what they saw. One pair installed themselves on the nineteenth floor of the Kentucky Home Life Building on Fifth and Jefferson and reported events with the aid of binoculars. Another broadcast from a tunnel of a hydro-electric plant below the river while at the U.S. Weather Bureau in the Washington building at Fourth and Market, another pair pried meteorologist J.L. Kendall for information. Harris himself gave reports near his home in Glenview while program director and former station announcer, Joe Eaton picked up a microphone once again and reported from the Point. The station donated air-time between the hours of 2pm-6pm to broadcast the news and warnings reported by the men.⁴⁸

Throughout Friday, January 22 these crews broke through regular programming to give updates, with announcers dangling from telephone and telegraph poles while engineers struggled to keep their equipment above water and dry. Brooks and Monroe traveled around with short-wave radio equipment, trailing famed *Life* photographer,

⁴⁷ *Ibid.*, B4; Welky, *The Thousand-Year Flood*, 125. A photocopied booklet commemorating the efforts of WHAS and the newspapers during the Flood was found at WHAS and will be cited throughout. Included with it were the writings of former engineer Larry Baysinger, some newspaper clippings, and photographs. There is no title and no indication of author or date. It appears to have been printed by the newspapers or the Standard Printing Co., also a Bingham-owned enterprise. Information within it will be cited on its own and to corroborate other sources. It will for here on out be cited as: No Author, "Send a Boat!" No Date, (WHAS Archival File, Louisville, KY), 1. The file is located at the Louisville branch of Clear Channel Communications, Inc. at 4000 Radio Drive, Louisville, Kentucky.

⁴⁸ "WHAS Radiocasts Flood Warnings," *Courier-Journal*, January 22, 1937.

Margaret Bourke-White for a chance at being featured in the magazine.⁴⁹ The famous image of Foster Brooks high on a telephone pole -- with a short-wave transmitter donated by Philadelphia's WFIL strapped to his back -- Pete Monroe below him, holding a microphone in near-waist deep water, was staged, although not for Bourke-White's camera. Additional images, printed in the January 31 edition of the *Courier-Journal* and reprinted February 7 in *The New York Times*, show Monroe pointing in dramatic fashion to some undetermined point out of frame as Brooks, now with the microphone, leans farther out atop the pole. Another has the two men, accompanied by three unidentified others, in debris-laden, knee-deep water, frozen in action poses with the clowning Brooks pressing the left side of his head to a short-wave transmitter. Regardless of the inauthenticity of these moments, they remain some of the most indelible images from the disaster.⁵⁰

The dispatch of crews throughout the city was not enough. Having rained 1.7 inches on Wednesday -- "nothing but a heavy dew," as one skeptic called it -- an astonishing 3.68 more the following day and evening, Friday, January 22 brought yet another 1.76 inches of accumulation. How far the Ohio River would rise was now unpredictable but it was apparent that the previous record set in 1884 -- 46.7 feet -- would be broken. By how much remained to be seen. The Beargrass Creek sub-station of Louisville Gas and Electric Company failed causing Mayor Miller to plead for a city-wide conservation of electricity where at all possible. Movie theaters contributed their part by closing their doors as did the University of Louisville and city and county schools. Long-distance telephone traffic reached its highest volume with 11,000

⁴⁹ Jones, "They Also Served . . .," LFPL, 1937 Flood Reports no. 19, 2; Rubin, B4.

⁵⁰ *Ibid.*, B4; "Photo Standalone 12 -- No Title," *The New York Times*, February 7, 1937. The picture with Monroe pointing appeared first in the *Courier* on January 31.

outgoing and over 25,000 incoming calls; all while telephone after telephone fell silent due to flooded homes and cables. Fears rose of a typhoid outbreak. “Water, water, everywhere and not a drop to drink,” WHAS station announcer E.A. Jonas jested in the middle of a water boiling advisory.⁵¹

“That night about five o’clock,” remembered Norma June Miller, “a warning was given over the radio for everyone west of Eighteenth Street who was not five feet above water to vacate.” Having woken up early that morning to walk around and see “how far the water had advanced,” Miller and her family now had to get “ready to leave, not knowing where to go or what to do.”⁵² The continued inundation of Portland and the western section of the city presented problems not just for families, their homes, and their belongings; the radio equipment for the Louisville Police Department stood in the encroaching water’s path. With the amount of desperate messages pouring into the station increasing and the disablement of police, and therefore rescue radio capabilities imminent, Barry Bingham, Mark Ethridge, Credo Harris, and other top officials of the radio and newspapers made the executive decision to withdraw WHAS from its scheduled CBS programming and establish the station as a central hub for rescue efforts, using its resources to distribute emergency contact, news, and information across the airwaves. Harris recalled the entire meeting took two minutes for the decision to be made and from there, staff members from both the radio and newspapers set off sprinting blind

⁵¹ “Flood Calls on Air Again,” *The Louisville Times*, May 3, 1937; Carver, Jr., “The Log Book of the January Flood,” Neville Miller Scrapbook no. 14, FHS, Louisville, KY; Jillson, *The Great Flood of 1937*, 33.

⁵² Norma June Miller, “A View of a Fire in High Water,” Story Seventeen in *Flood Stories by Shawnee High School Girls, Louisville, Kentucky, 1937* (Louisville: Standard Printing Co., 1937), 64.

into the first lap of a marathon. “I still was not greatly impressed,” Caldwell recalled, “that the situation here was critical.”⁵³

“Send a Boat!”

Friday night into Saturday afternoon, January 23 brought what appeared to be a reprieve as temperatures dropped below freezing and sleet and snow began falling. Citizens in areas out of immediate danger nestled in and stayed out of the cold. “The ice and snow were so bad for traveling, I . . . stayed at home to grade examination papers,” Caldwell remembered. “Not much of that got done, however, for the radio proved too interesting with its constant directions to boats doing rescue work.”⁵⁴ “Saturday,” wrote a young Ida Mae Clark, “which was a rather peaceful day, was spent listening to the nerve-racking radio calls for boats, trucks, and ambulances.”⁵⁵ Inside the offices of WHAS, a frenzy of activity was ensuing. “Everybody stayed downtown; we had a little island down there and we just worked around the clock,” remembered engineer Carl Nielsen. “We brought our wives in if we could get them down there; we took them down by boat . . . and we brought in our relatives to help out because it took everyone.”⁵⁶ A makeshift phone bank spread across a series of desks with one area designated as a “central copy, or clearing desk, through which every message was passed to avoid duplications and keep the messages to a minimum without impairing content.” Southern Bell technicians “hastily installed” fifteen telephone lines for exclusive contact to outside official sources within “City Hall, the Mayor’s Committee, the Department of Sanitation,

⁵³ “Send a Boat!” WHAS Archival File, 1; Jones, “They Also Served . . .,” LFPL, 1937 Flood Reports no. 19, 2; Harris, 276; Caldwell, 1.

⁵⁴ Caldwell, 1.

⁵⁵ Ida Mae Clark, “On the Move,” Story Five in *Flood Stories by Shawnee High School Girls, Louisville, Kentucky, 1937*, 16.

⁵⁶ Nielsen interview.

the Health Office, the Police, the Red Cross, the Armory, and all relief centers.”⁵⁷

Activity surrounding the area produced a cacophonous noise of excited voices and ringing telephones amid unceasing clacking from the typewriters of staff members as they attempted to keep pace dictating the urgent messages that seemed never-ending.

Throughout Saturday afternoon and night announcements reverberated from radios all across the city: “A boat is needed immediately at 229 ½ South 18th Street. There is a confinement case at this location which must be removed to City Hospital at once!”

Carrollton, Kentucky, is in desperate need of 1,000cc’s of typhoid vaccine, 1,000 blankets, and all possible coal. The city is completely isolated and almost totally submerged!

Men are needed at once to unload several trucks at the Municipal Bridge. These trucks are loaded with boats which are urgently needed for rescue work.

Three people are clinging to a chimney at 4328 South 38th Street. Boats in the vicinity proceed immediately to this location and rescue these people. They are reported weak from exposure!⁵⁸

Often messages’ arrival at the station signaled the end of long verbal chain of communication. A police sergeant working at City Hall described how involved a call for help could be:

Some of them started by rowboat, were passed to people in trucks, who relayed them to people in faster motors. These stopped at water’s edge, again gave the messages to people in boats who in turn transferred them to pedestrians on the far shore, and these pedestrians brought them through to City Hall. I relayed them immediately by wire to the station.⁵⁹

The reverse of this process relayed through various neighborhoods where citizens, listening to the radios in their homes, heard reports of calls for help needed in areas

⁵⁷ “Send a Boat!” 4; Harris, 279.

⁵⁸ Jones, “They Also Served . . .,” 3.

⁵⁹ *Ibid.*, 7.

nearby. Writing down the bulletins, they would open their windows and shout the information to rescue workers passing by in boats.⁶⁰ Energy within the studio was electric and carried over into the reports given on air captivating more and more listeners curious for updates.

The break in weather had some conveying a cautious optimism that the worst was over. The light sleet and freezing temperatures of Saturday afforded rescue workers the opportunity to assess the magnitude of the situation. Throughout the day, an estimated 6,000 additional people needed rescue from flooded areas. Pumping ceased near the city reservoir in Crescent Hill and the city was put on a water ration of two hours per day. Orders for the curtailing of gasoline consumption helped aid the relief effort; churches announced the cancellation of their Sunday services as many in their congregations were either homeless, displaced, or both. Many hoped the cold would slow the river's rise near its current level of 51 feet and preparations could begin for clean-up early in the upcoming week.⁶¹

Black Sunday

"There was one thing my parents kept reassuring me with," remembered Shirley Shoulders, "that God promised Noah and all mankind that he would never destroy the Earth by a flood again. So we waited to see that rainbow once more."⁶² Thousands of individuals would need such reassurance as Saturday's relative calm began disintegrating into hysteria in the early morning hours of Sunday, January 24. Over flooded areas dusted by sleet, snow, and ice, one final deluge began falling -- 3.11 inches of additional

⁶⁰ Harris, 279.

⁶¹ Carver, "The Log of the January Flood of 1937."

⁶² Reminiscences of Shirley Shoulders, "Send a Boat! Readers Remember the 1937 Flood," *Courier-Journal*, January 21, 1987, 7.

precipitation by day's end. Citizens watched in awe as engorged sewers, under pressure, shot their manhole covers into the air releasing geysers of backflow.⁶³ The radio reported grim news from all points across the city as the situation began to grow dire:

The meter at the Weather Bureau predicts a rise of 2 feet in the next 24 hours with a crest of 55 to 56 feet by Wednesday. It has been raining now for 12 hours steadily – raining had effect on relief workers. Sections of city are under water that no one in Louisville in his wildest dreams would have imagined possible. A great many of these places are flooded from backed up sewers and not from the river itself reaching that far.⁶⁴

Attention all police in the vicinity of 18th Street and Broadway. Looting is being attempted at this location. This is an order from the Chief of Police in Louisville. You are instructed to shoot to kill if necessary!

Patrolman Odet needs twelve ambulances at once at the Emergency Hospital at Bardstown Road and Slaughter Avenue. There are twenty urgent stretcher cases on the sidewalk there. They must be removed immediately. All ambulances --- calling all ambulances – go at once to Bardstown Road and Slaughter Avenue. This is imperative!⁶⁵

The depth of Beargrass Creek at Broadway and Baxter Avenue rose and its current increased, making passage into the Highlands from downtown impossible except by power boat. Jake Britt, a mechanic with the fire department had, days earlier, suggested utilizing empty whiskey barrels from distillery storage houses along Lexington Road for the construction of a bridge across the raging creek. On Sunday he saw City Hall deciding to enact his idea.⁶⁶

At 6:00 A.M. that morning, WHAS began its uninterrupted service. By 4:00 P.M. that afternoon, as Monroe, Eaton, and Brooks alternated behind the microphone in the announcer's booth of Studio A, handling the ceaseless barrage of typewritten messages

⁶³ Carver; Reminisces of Mary June Bartley Coombs and Eva Johnson Price, "Send a Boat! Readers Remember the 1937 Flood," 3, 6.

⁶⁴ Station WAVE broadcast over NBC, January 24, 1937, 2:35pm, taken from WAVE Radio 1937 Flood Records 22 Jan. – 4. March 1937, Filson Historical Society, Louisville, KY.

⁶⁵ Jones, "They Also Served . . .," 3.

⁶⁶ Ira Simmons, "The Flood," *Courier-Journal Sunday Magazine*, January 18, 1987, 21.

that gathered before them on a podium, Harris received word from Louisville Gas and Electric that electrical power for the city would not be guaranteed past 8:00 P.M. that evening. The consequences of the station leaving the air were unimaginable; a loss of power threatened the “only avenue of communication” for “reporting emergency cases” and “keeping refugee workers informed.”⁶⁷ The Louisville utility company’s technicians worked alongside those from Kentucky Utilities to install a high-tension wire from the hydro-electric plant at Dix Dam outside Harrodsburg, Kentucky to the transmitter at Jeffersontown. They had until midnight before switches closed and electricity coursed through the wire, regardless of its completion. WHAS engineers secured a diesel generator from Stanton, KY to keep the transmitter online but its arrival time was uncertain forcing Harris and Lee Coulson to seek other options.⁶⁸

Harris reached out to stations WFBM in Indianapolis, WLAP in Lexington, and WCKY in Covington to form the Volunteer Inter-City Network for Flood Relief in the Ohio Valley. When needed, these stations agreed to turn over use of their signals to broadcast messages from WHAS by means of long distance telephone lines.⁶⁹ The cornerstone of this network came from the South after Coulson contacted his personal friend, Harry Stone, station manager at WSM in Nashville, Tennessee. Started in 1925 by the National Life Insurance Company of Nashville, WSM and its popular Grand Ole Opry program had long been a rival to its one-time network partner, WHAS. The pressing emergency of a city-wide power failure emboldened Coulson with the audacity to send Stone, by way of teletype, a request for the express permission to use the Nashville station’s transmitter:

⁶⁷ Harris, 276-277.

⁶⁸ Jones, 4; Towner interview.

⁶⁹ “Send a Boat!” 2.

Louisville power going off tonight/WHAS studios must stay on the air for relief work/Can you give us the entire facilities of WSM through mutual lines to carry on this work over your transmitter/We will gladly pay all commercials you miss/We must serve these people tonight/Please advise rush and we will hold this line.⁷⁰

Without hesitation, Stone agreed. “She’s yours immediately if you want her, and as long as you need her,” Stone messaged back. “We will join you at 8. If your power fails, can you set up battery and phone in your office?”⁷¹ The Louisville studios had one Western Electric model 22 Remote Amplifier that could amplify WHAS’s transmission over long-distance phone lines to Nashville. Nielsen paddled a rowboat down Broadway to the same Sears and Roebuck store Monroe and Brooks purchased their raingear from almost three days prior. Accompanied by the store’s manager, the two men navigated their vessel between the rows of merchandise commandeering as many batteries – dry-cell B storage batteries for the amplifier, smaller voltages for flashlights – as they could find. They also took it upon themselves to fill the boat with as many pair of long underwear as they could to clothe the men and women working at the station in preparation of the heat being shut off.⁷²

While batteries proved easy to come by, the real challenge lay in securing a functioning phone connection between Louisville and Nashville. The flooding threw yet another obstacle in the way of the station and over-taxed utility workers upon discovery the Salt River had submerged eighteen miles of telephone poles south of the city. Technicians with Southern Bell promised to address the issue as soon as possible;

⁷⁰ Craig Havighurst, *Air Castle of the South: WSM and the Making of Music City* (Chicago: University of Illinois Press, 2007), 93. Havighurst cites the teletype from FCC testimony given by Stone in 1947. However, his notes are lacking in further detail.

⁷¹ *Ibid.*, 4; “WHAS 1937 Flood Coverage Documentary,” No Date, www.lkyradio.com/WHASairchecks.htm. Accessed November 9, 2011.

⁷² Nielsen interview; Carl Nielsen interviewed in “WHAS 1937 Flood Coverage Documentary,” No Date, www.lkyradio.com/WHASairchecks.htm. Accessed 9 November 2011.

however, one anonymous electrician already had a solution. In an effort to reinforce and secure the circuit, one man -- whose name has been lost to history -- fastened together forty phone lines, while in a boat, at telephone poles book-ending the flooded area in turn creating one large makeshift cable. Testing this feat of improvisation, technicians detected a signal and, after a few quick tests, WSM was ready to receive WHAS's transmission should it be called upon. In the weeks after, receding water revealed a dead horse entangled within the submerged telephone wires. Technicians thought the animal responsible for the recurring fade in frequency between the two stations.⁷³

The timing of the repair was pivotal. Like dominoes, the substations of Louisville Gas and Electric began failing one after another. The Western Substation failed first at 7:43 P.M. darkening the entire West End; one minute later, the Magazine Substation failed and with it power to homes and businesses between Eighth and 18th Streets from the river to Hill Street. At 8:40 P.M. the street lights went dark in the southern portion of Louisville before the Canal Substation failed just under an hour later. At 10:06 P.M. Station WAVE broadcast this premature update over NBC concerning the city's power situation:

“[The station was informed] that tonight at 8 o'clock the city power supply would have to shut off and that there would be no lights available. That also meant that there would be no power available for the two radio stations to stay on the air. Since the rescue work by boat and truck depends so largely on radio instructions for guidance, that was bad. Here at WAVE we started trying to find some auxiliary means of supplying power to stay on the air. By broadcast messages, long distance telephone, teletype, and telegraph we have tried to find a generator that would give us power when the city supply was finally shut off. . . . When 8 o'clock came, power and lights in all sections of the city except one were shut off.

⁷³ Jones, 4; Welky, 129. A fire alarm wire may have also been bundled up in the makeshift cable. Havighurst, *Air Castle of the South*, 93; “No Horseplay,” *Broadcasting*, February 1, 1938, 70.

But the downtown central district is still on, by a miracle, and we are still on the air and still broadcasting.⁷⁴

Harris gave his announcers instructions for listeners to salvage batteries wherever they could or dig up their old crystal radio sets. Should all power fail, they were to tune into WSM at 650 kilocycles for the latest messages from WHAS. Harris also ordered trucks, outfitted with radio receivers and loudspeakers, to disperse throughout the city to continue projecting flood information to rescuers and citizens without electricity. At 11:39 P.M., the Riverside Substation, its thirty-foot sign long a landmark welcoming visitors crossing the Municipal Bridge to the “Gateway to the South,” failed, taking the remainder of the city’s power – and Station WAVE’s signal – with it.⁷⁵

“The Whole World is Listening”

“When the lights went out,” remembered Goldie Baron, “so did the radio and we didn’t know how high the water was going.” For a brief moment, a deafening silence preyed upon the city’s “growing fears of isolation and abandonment.” Those with battery-powered radios switched over to WSM while those who did not sat in the silent darkness. They now “knew less and feared more.”⁷⁶ The loss of power ratcheted the tension within the studio offices as men and women manning phones and typewriters now worked in the dim lighting of oil lamps. “Of course it was cold,” Catherine Steele, a secretary, recalled. “The gasoline heaters . . . after a certain amount of time throws [sic]

⁷⁴ WAVE NBC Broadcast January 24, 1937, 10:06pm, WAVE Radio 1937 Flood Records 22 Jan. – 4. March 1937, Filson Historical Society, Louisville, KY.

⁷⁵ Succession of power failures found in Carver; Harris, 279. WAVE would continue broadcasting with the use of WLW’s signal in Cincinnati which had power and transmitting issues of its own. In large part WAVE’s contributions were ineffectual, overshadowed by those of WHAS although it deserves mention and an independent examination of its own.

⁷⁶ Goldie Baron, Entry from 27 January – 6 February 1937, Diary of Goldie Baron, 1901-1985, Filson Historical Society, Louisville, Kentucky; Rick Bell, *The Great Flood of 1937: Rising Waters, Soaring Spirits, Louisville, Kentucky* (Louisville, Butler Books, 2007), 74; No Author, “Neighborhood House Feeds Thousands Daily,” Louisville Free Public Library, 1937 Flood Reports, no. 9, 1.

off fumes, and of course you're typing and have to keep your eyes from smarting. Then they gave us typhoid shots. Between it all we were sort of operating at a disadvantage." One man took to taping a telephone receiver to his head so he would have both hands free to type. More and more, the messages pouring in from victims indicated a heightened sense of desperation. Steele remembered one mother of five calling for advice on what to do because her husband was away on business. Another call Steele took came from a man who had returned to his family's home to gather some possessions. "Lady, the water is around my waist now," the man explained, "Which way can I get out of here?"⁷⁷

Police Department calling: Urgent! Fifty refugees must be moved immediately by boat from 1023 Madison Street. This is imperative!

Milk is needed for nine babies at Missing Persons Bureau at 1010 South Second Street.

Fire Patrol boats operating south of Broadway are ordered immediately to Third and Breckenridge. Attention Coast Guard: boats going from Eighteenth and Broadway to Twenty-Sixth and Broadway should continue on to Twenty-Sixth and Dumesnil.

Cancel call for power boat to take nurse to Fontaine Ferry.⁷⁸

For almost 188 consecutive hours, WHAS worked to direct rescue efforts and calm fears, disseminating information concerning everything from navigation, food and medical supplies, manpower, and reports from government. Through an arrangement negotiated over the telephone Monday, January 25, CBS and NBC agreed to turn over their networks to aid in whatever manner they could. Nielsen fielded a telephone call from the British Broadcasting Company in London requesting permission to rebroadcast WHAS's messages. "I said, 'Sure, go ahead!'" he remembered. "I didn't ask anybody

⁷⁷ Catherine Steele interviewed in "'WHAS 1937 Flood Coverage Documentary;" Jones, 5.

⁷⁸ WFBR Transmission of WSM Flood Coverage, www.lkyradio.com/WHASairchecks.htm Accessed 9 November 2011.

else. You made decisions. Same as war time, you made decisions.” The Volunteer Inter-City Network swelled to include more than two hundred stations as far east as Connecticut and as far west as Texas as well as 6,000 short-wave stations operated by amateurs. Overall, it was the biggest hookup in radio’s history at that time. WSM continued carrying WHAS’s signal because the improvised power combination at Jeffersontown proved inconsistent and engineers waged a constant fight against power dips and surges.⁷⁹

“We didn’t realize at the time that this was attracting anything like so much national attention as it did attract,” Barry Bingham recalled. “It took a disaster to give us the biggest boost we ever got, I suppose, in national publicity.”⁸⁰ Across the United States and into Canada, the Volunteer Inter-City Network broadcast reports originating from Louisville into the homes of millions. “In many cases,” *The New York Times* reported, “listeners tuned in expecting to hear the regularly listed programs planned weeks ahead and rehearsed for broadcasting from New York and Hollywood, but instead they picked up urgent calls from Kentucky for vaccine, for food, clothing and boats.” A Brooklyn man confessed in a letter to being “thrilled by the heroic efforts made by the staff at Station WHAS,” which he called an “outstanding epic in radio history” that no other contribution to flood relief could equal. When Kentucky Governor Happy Chandler made an appeal for aid from the evacuated State Penitentiary in Frankfort

⁷⁹ “Send a Boat!” 3; Nielsen interview; Jones, 5; “CBS Radio Recreation of WHAS’ Coverage of the 1937 Flood,” May 2, 1937, www.lkyradio.com/WHASairchecks.htm. Accessed 9 November 2011; “A Voice in Darkness,” WSM ad in *Broadcasting*, January 15, 1938, 33; Towner interview

⁸⁰ Bingham interview.

through a telephone line that was patched into the station's control board, "it was as if each member of the radio audience were at the telephone receiver."⁸¹

"Real life provided more drama than the canned programs of the studios," wrote University of Louisville Sociology professor, Robert I. Kutak the next year. "The tremendous interest of the radio audience in the reports from the flood zone perhaps indicates that the synthetic circuses the American people are offered in their leisure hours lack reality and substance." As a result, while Louisville experienced "its most disastrous flood . . . the radio audience enjoyed a ringside seat without leaving the comfortable arms of the living room chair."⁸² Kutak's observation is unfair. As historian Chris Chandler notes, the flood was the first "genuine life-or-death national crisis" for the fledgling medium, "one for which no template or format existed from past experience."⁸³ The same can be said for the untold numbers of people listening from outside the flooded areas. For the first time in history, an entire country could follow along, minute-by-minute, with the pitiful plight of a small section of its citizens. Radio brought the drama and excitement, the desperation, confusion, and horror of a natural disaster to living rooms across the world. For better or for worse, WHAS and its fellow stations within the Volunteer Inter-City Network pioneered aspects of the 24-hour news cycle so prevalent by the early twenty-first century.⁸⁴

⁸¹ Orrin E. Dunlap, Jr., "SOS From Inland Sea: All America Hears the Call and Rushes Aid as Radio Acts in Flood Relief," *The New York Times*, January 31, 1937; "New York Man Describes Thrills as WHAS Dispatches Aid," *Courier-Journal and Times Flood Edition*, no. 7, January 31, 1937.

⁸² Robert I. Kutak, "The Sociology of Crises: The Louisville Flood of 1937" *Social Forces*, Vol. 17, No. 1 (Oct., 1938), pp. 66, 69-70.

⁸³ Chris Chandler, "The Whole World is Listening: WHAS Radio's Eight-Day Round-the-Clock Coverage of the Disastrous 1937 Ohio River Flood Set the Standard for Crisis News Reporting," *American History*, (Aug., 2007), 53.

⁸⁴ *Ibid.*, 59.

Hierarchy within WHAS was non-existent as everyone from executives and assistants to volunteers participated in the emergency efforts. Environmental stresses of cold and claustrophobia combined with the push and pull of adrenaline and exhaustion as many felt compelled to remain at their posts for stretches of twenty-four to thirty-six hours at a time. Workers grabbed naps in the larger Studio B or soothed frazzled nerves with nips of whiskey. Some handled the circumstances better than others. One unidentified woman broke into screaming hysterics, halting the drone of activity long enough for her removal to a warm bed. One punch-drunk announcer cracked up on air over saying “remooned,” his accidental hybrid of marooned and removed. He too was taken from the studios for rest. To cut down on these incidents and to give the staff more of a break, executives instituted mandatory twelve-hour shifts and Bingham secured the top two floors of the Seelbach Hotel for staff and their families to rest. Impassioned reporting transformed into what one author referred to as a “dead singsong” as announcers developed an affectless presentation to preserve their speaking voices which turned their messages into one continuous drone.⁸⁵ “The radio,” remembered one man, “brought its most ghastly messages in the same monotonous tone.” Not even a plea for embalmers to report to the Waverly Hills Sanatorium could provoke a shift in pitch as countless reports -- true, false, exaggerated, or downplayed -- blurred into one another.⁸⁶

Disseminating fact from fiction proved a large part of WHAS’s role during the crisis. Rumors of widespread death and disease permeated throughout the city. A trench dug next to the city’s General Hospital afforded the facility a place to dispose of its garbage. Yet onlookers and their imaginations spread rumors the trench was to be “a

⁸⁵ A.L. Crabb, quoted in Welky, 132.

⁸⁶ Reminiscences of Frank Van Slyke, Louisville Free Public Library, 1937 Flood Reports, no., 16, 3’ Jones, 3; Welky, 132-133.

mass grave for all the people who died of typhoid.” Purported sightings of floating dead bodies turned up from all over the city. When the Louisville Varnish Company exploded, “people were scared to death and said it was the end of the world and that the water was on fire.” Norma June Miller watched the fire illuminate the darkened skyline from the window of her family’s room on the fifteenth floor of the Kentucky Hotel. Terrified, she remembered expecting it “to spread and perhaps destroy all the city.” There were estimates that as many as 1,200 people perished.⁸⁷

Mayor Miller did his best to combat the fear-baiting and spread of misinformation. He chastised merchants for price gouging and threatened to confiscate the inventories of any retailer taking advantage of distressed citizens. Once technicians installed a special wire from City Hall to the studio, saving him the time a journey in a row boat consumed, Miller could at any time go on the air with new information or when fears needed soothing. Just three people succumbed in the Louisville Varnish fire, far fewer than the 1,200 many heard and feared.⁸⁸ WHAS mirrored City Hall and worked to reverse any incorrect message it broadcast:

A false rumor has been broadcast to the effect that the Southern Junior High School is under quarantine. We wish to emphasize that such rumors are false and the entire area surrounding Southern Junior High School is in fine condition and no quarantine exists.⁸⁹

Despite these efforts, inflated reports persisted even after the crisis abated as this unidentified Associated Press excerpt highlights:

⁸⁷ Simmons, “The Flood,” 20; Reminiscences of James H. Pilkerton, “Send a Boat! Readers Remember the 1937 Flood,” 3; Miller, “A View of a Fire in High Water,” *Flood Stories by Shawnee High School Girls*, 64.

⁸⁸ To be sure service across the phone line was uninterrupted, technicians drove wooden pegs beneath the receiving hooks at both the studio and the mayor’s office in City Hall. Jones, 5

⁸⁹ WFBR Transmission of WSM Flood Coverage.

A story of families swept away, of bodies burned in a crematory, of others flung into ditches, and of suicide and insanity was told today by five Charlotte policemen who returned from 11 days' patrol duty in flood-stricken Louisville. They exhibited a bullet-riddled automobile – a stark reminder, they said, of a rattled national guardsman who fired six bullets at them the morning after their arrival in Louisville.⁹⁰

Throughout the dramatic course of the crisis several instances of humor punctuated the tense atmosphere at the station and within the city. Concerned pet owners called in requesting boats to their abandoned houses in order for their animals to be fed. One woman called to request an increase in her gas pressure while another called to scold her milkman for failing to deliver milk as scheduled. Many remembered the passing sight of nuns fleeing the flooded Ursuline Academy at 806 East Chestnut Street on the back of an Oertel's Beer truck. "Imagine the scene," wrote Sister Carmelita Doyle, "Pouring down rain, an open truck, 10 nuns standing with raised umbrellas, suitcases in water, umbrellas dripping on each other's guimpes and habits."⁹¹

One of the most repeated stories from the flood came courtesy of Rabbi Solomon N. Bazell. Determined to make it to the studio for his weekly sermon, Bazell's boat capsized while crossing Beargrass Creek, soaking him to the waist. Upon arriving at the station, studio organist, Herb Cook wrapped Bazell in a pink blanket, poured him some whiskey and went off to look for some dry clothes. Bazell created quite a spectacle when he strolled into the studio pants-less, wearing a Dizzy Dean sweatshirt and still clutching his blanket. Nevertheless, he conducted his broadcast and the studio supplied him with a pair of trousers before he departed home.⁹²

⁹⁰ "Story of Flood Horror Related," Associated Press, February 8, 1937. Found in Neville Miller Scrapbook, 1937-1944, Filson Historical Society, Louisville, Kentucky.

⁹¹ Jones, 5; Simmons, 18-19.

⁹² "Radio Aids Flood Sufferers," *The Palm Beach Post*, January 31, 1937, 18.

Inside the offices of WHAS the flickering low light of candles and coal-oil lamps often made it difficult to distinguish faces resulting in several mishaps. George Greene, foreman for the *Courier-Journal* press room, offered to help a WHAS staffer editing copy for announcers who put him to work delivering her messages. The staffer never asked her messenger's name, calling the balding, fifty-four year old Greene, "Boy" whenever she wanted his attention. Greene performed tasks as requested over the course of several days. His identity remained unknown until a messenger stopped him with news that his family had been evacuated and were now safe with relatives outside of Louisville. Greene's new boss saw no time to express relief and elation and handed her "Boy" another assignment. Greene's harbinger of good news stopped the both of them to formally introduce the staffer to her errand "Boy." As embarrassment from her lack of respect swept over the young woman, Greene assured her, "It's alright, Miss, I'm still 'Boy' to you. Don't know that I'd answer to any other name."⁹³

An almost identical situation occurred when another staffer picked none other than Barry Bingham, Sr. out of the room to perform tasks for him. Bingham's presence was everywhere in the studio as he sought to help out in any manner available. He had no access to his home in Glenview and had not returned since January 22 after dropping his wife, Mary – in labor with their third child -- at Baptist Hospital in eastern Jefferson County. Mark Ethridge oversaw the printing of an abbreviated, flood edition of the *Courier-Journal* and *The Louisville Times*. "There seemed to be no particular point in my going up there to try and get out that four page paper which we were doing," Bingham recalled. "That was well-manned." Therefore, he remained in the studios until the crisis abated and on occasion took time behind the microphone to relieve tired

⁹³ "Send a Boat!" 6.

announcers.⁹⁴ Engineer Joe Fox remembered Barry Bingham as a man that never raised his voice or lost his temper. Regardless of this observation, the unique situation the flood thrust the staff into may have saved one man from a serious reprimand or worse, his job:

Barry was working out doing anything that anybody would tell him. He was running in and this one guy kind of picked him as his own copy boy. "Take this in, see? And take this in." And he started, after a while, working him pretty hard. Barry was a little slow getting back and he lit in on him: "Hey! You're going to have to beat this!" So he chewed him out and somebody overheard this conversation and told the man, "Do you know who that was? That's Barry Bingham! The man pays your salary!" Pretty well shook him up, he almost fainted!⁹⁵

Finishing a cup of coffee in the emergency kitchen setup within the basement of the newspaper building, Tom Wallace received an earful from a young member of the circulation department. "Why in hell don't you help with these dishes?" he barked. A recent hire, the young man stood over a stunned Wallace, the editor of *The Louisville Times*, as he began washing. "Here, don't you know how to wipe dishes?" the young man criticized. Grabbing a rag, he conducted a brief tutorial on the proper method of dishwashing for the man whose journalistic efforts had help save the Cumberland Falls from destruction.⁹⁶

The Sun Shines Bright on My Old Kentucky Home

The Ohio River crested at two o'clock in the morning on January 27 at a depth of 57.1 feet and began its retreat later that afternoon. As a result, WHAS began to shift its focus towards helping family members reunite with their loved ones separated by the flood. At 2:30 A.M. on February 1, Barry Bingham took to WHAS's microphone. Although there remained "many problems of relief and rehabilitation in this flood-

⁹⁴ Tift and Jones, 147; Bingham interview.

⁹⁵ Joe C. Fox interview.

⁹⁶ "Send a Boat!" 10.

stricken city,” Bingham announced, “the immediate emergency is passing, and Louisville is returning to something like a normal existence. The situation has now been brought under control to the extent where it is possible for this station to leave the air for a few hours.” Bingham then concluded an unprecedented 187 hours and thirty minutes of continuous broadcast: “WHAS is now preparing to sign off with a final word of gratitude to all who have helped us in this crisis which we have passed. From our hearts we say ‘we thank you, and goodnight.’” Announcers estimated they read 115,000 messages over the air, “an average of one every six seconds.” WHAS sales managers estimated a financial loss of \$20,000 in commercial air-time.⁹⁷

On April 24, *The New York Times* reported the Columbia Broadcasting System would award WHAS its Medal for Distinguished Service. First awarded in 1929, the medal intended to recognize “individuals rendering an outstanding contribution to the whole progress and advancement of radio broadcasting,” previous recipients included Amelia Earhart and Leopold Stokowski. On May 2, CBS aired a twenty-minute radio play re-enacting the flood coverage of WHAS before Barry Bingham accepted the award from the station’s studio in Louisville. CBS president, William S. Paley provided a personal introduction. “There are many daily community needs and interests which a well-run station recognizes and seeks to serve,” Paley said, “but I doubt the full efficiency and caliber of the station is ever wholly tested until a real community crisis arises.” The flooding Ohio River tested not only the technical capabilities of WHAS, but “that which is far more important,” Paley claimed. The flood tested “the character and responsibility of its management.” After an introduction from Harris, Barry Bingham

⁹⁷ “WHAS Takes a Rest After 187.5 Hours,” *Courier-Journal and Times Flood Edition* no. 9, February 2, 1937; Welky, 138-139.

accepted the award on behalf of the entire station. "You must take just pride in the calm and efficient operations of your staff throughout those trying days," Paley told him from New York. "The calm and unimpassioned voice of WHAS, through a great catastrophe, set a standard for the whole American broadcasting."⁹⁸

Tragedy soured lasting satisfaction throughout WHAS when later that year on December 19, Robert W. Bingham passed away at Johns Hopkins Hospital from complications associated with Hodgkin's disease. In a cruel twist of fate, the next day station announcer Pete Monroe passed away in a Louisville hospital after battling a blood infection. *Broadcasting* printed a respectful tribute to both men in its January 1938 issue calling the elder Bingham a "pioneer and friend" whose "inspiration for public service . . . prompted [him] to give his community a radio station." For Monroe, the flood marked the pinnacle of his eight-year career in radio. Survivors still recalled his voice on the fiftieth anniversary of the flood. "I hope you pay tribute to Monroe, who spent hours and days directing over WHAS radio the rescue of thousands West-End residents," one reader wrote in his recollection for the *Courier-Journal*. At the time of his passing, Monroe was just twenty-nine years old. The following June, city officials commemorated his efforts with a brass marker and tree planted on the courthouse lawn.⁹⁹

The flood of 1937 proved to be the finest broadcasting moment in the history of WHAS when the station provided the quintessential example of service to its community. It represented the crystallization of the type of public service Robert W. Bingham envisioned; the zenith of an evolutionary journey guided under the careful concerning eye

⁹⁸ "Radio Medal to Paper," *The New York Times*, April 24, 1937; "CBS Radio Recreation of WHAS' Coverage of the 1937 Flood;" "CBS Re-Enacts Stirring Pleas to 'Send a Boat,'" *Courier-Journal*, May 3, 1937.

⁹⁹ "Radio Mourns," *Broadcasting* January 1, 1938, 24; Reminiscences of Thomas F. Kellerman, "Send a Boat! Readers Remember the 1937 Flood," 2; No Title, *Broadcasting*, June 1, 1938, 57.

of Credo Harris. To Louisville, the station constituted an anchor that kept the Ohio River from washing away calm and rationality, “the voice of authority” as one editorial called it.¹⁰⁰ To the country and the world, they personified the pioneers of broadcast “journalistic standards and techniques.” Scholars such as Chandler suggest WHAS’s coverage provided the foundation from which Edward R. Murrow constructed his gripping broadcasts from London during the Second World War, although this cannot be substantiated. Chandler also claims modern historians fail to credit WHAS’s contribution as part-genesis of the marathon broadcast. The comparisons are too evident to be ignored, as he explains:

While innovation may have devolved into cliché over the generations, the lineage remains unmistakable: The local TV reporter who’ll clutch a tree trunk in the howling winds this hurricane season . . . descends in spirit directly from Foster Brooks of WHAS, grasping a phone pole with one hand and a microphone with the other, during those dark days of 1937.¹⁰¹

While these arguments do hold some validity they distract from that which is of greatest importance: the willingness of WHAS to offer itself in its fullest capacity, without hesitation, to the interests, convenience, and necessity of its listening public. To that generation, the phrase “Send a boat!” harkens them back to a dark, cold, and wet January huddled near a radio they so often sought for escape. For many, the radio became their literal rescue.

¹⁰⁰ “Louisville Carries On,” *Courier-Journal and Times* Flood Edition no. 4, January 28, 1937.

¹⁰¹ Chandler, “The Whole World is Listening,” 59.

CHAPTER FOUR

“LET US ADJUST OUR METHODS TO MEET THE PUBLIC INTEREST”

Riding high from the national acknowledgments for its efforts during the great flood, WHAS looked to the future with the same fervent ambition it had in its earliest years. Plans for a new transmitting plant were in the making with aims to construct a state-of-the-art facility representative of the station and its reputation. Through it WHAS would make a plea for superpower, experiment with FM transmission, and satiate a brief technological fascination with facsimile transmission. Cultivated with care by Credo Harris, the prestige of the station continued under the watchful eyes of Lee Coulson and Victor Sholis although no man associated with WHAS had more of a presence nationally than Mark F. Ethridge. Beginning in the late 1930s, the newspaper man delved more into broadcasting becoming interim president of the National Association of Broadcasters, an increasing presence at Federal Communications Commission hearings, as well as a frequent commentator on government and industry developments concerning the medium.¹

¹ Much like Credo Harris, Mark F. Ethridge's efforts and presence in the radio broadcasting industry deserve an article or chapter of their own. Extensive coverage of his involvements with the National Association of Broadcasters as well as reports on his numerous appearances before the FCC representing WHAS and as chairman of the Newspaper Radio Committee can be found in *Broadcasting* throughout the late 1930s and 1940s.

It is peculiar, then, to observe that after all the time, energy, and finances invested into WHAS to remain at the forefront of radio broadcasting, after all of the goodwill generated in the public from the services the station provided, that as the decade of the 1940s drew to a close, Barry Bingham offered the station up for sale. Television did not cause the near-demise of WHAS. Rather, as this chapter will argue, it was Bingham's firm commitment to his family's newspapers, a commitment he held paramount above any other of his family's ventures that threatened the undoing of the station. The threat stemmed from the prospect of acquiring debt to fund construction of new facilities for the newspapers, the radio station, and television, a new technology whose incalculable financial investment worried Bingham. "It seemed to me," he remembered:

It seemed to all of us that probably it would be better to divest ourselves of our broadcasting station and try to put all of our resources into the newspapers to be sure that we were going to be able to continue with those on the level that we'd always tried to operate on.²

That executive decision opened up a brief, but embattled chapter often overlooked in the history of WHAS as disparate figures and companies from across the United States rose up to make their bids in hopes of acquiring one of the nation's marquee radio broadcasting stations.

Superpower: Brinkley and Crosley

WHAS entered 1938 with more popularity than at any time prior in its sixteen year history. On January 24, its staff and that of WAVE, along with more than 100 performers, religious figures, and city officials presented a "Flood Gratitude Day Radio Revue" at the Jefferson County Armory on Walnut Street. Over 12,000 people attended while security turned away an estimated 5,000 more at the building's gates which

² Bingham interview.

remained locked for the duration of the program's three and a half hours. WHAS broadcast the program in its entirety while abbreviated versions ran over CBS and NBC. Interspersed between performances from some of the region's most beloved radio performers were speeches of appreciation from Frank R. McNinch, chairman of the FCC, Cary T. Grayson, chairman of the American Red Cross, and an emotion-stirring speech from former mayor, Neville Miller. Broadcast over the Armory's P.A. system from a studio in New York, Miller, who left political office to become assistant to the president of Princeton University, paid tribute to Louisville radio: "The memory of those dark days is not pleasant, but gratitude is pleasant indeed," he remarked. "We shall never forget the flood and we shall never forget you, our friends, and the part you played in that stirring drama."³

The unexpected acclaim and notoriety in the aftermath of the flood offered WHAS a perfect opportunity to upgrade its facilities yet again. The transmitter housed in the plant at Jeffersontown, while not six years old and in fine operating condition, was obsolete. In the past, increasing the quality of its broadcasting service would have been reason enough for WHAS to expand its technical capabilities, but there was a different inspiration behind this push for improvement. Throughout the 1930s the concept of superpower, a topic as old as radio broadcasting itself, increased in prevalence within industry discourse. When regional rival WLW of Cincinnati became the first commercial station in the United States to acquire an experimental license for broadcasting with

³ Dolly Sullivan, "Radio's Role in 1937 Flood Recalled," *Broadcasting*, February 1, 1938, 70. Radio performers featured in the program came from as far away as WSM in Nashville, WLS and WBBM in Chicago, WBAP in Fort Worth, Texas, and WLW in Cincinnati. The Armory acted as a place of refuge for more than 6,000 Louisvillians during the flood.

power above the 50,000-watt cap, WHAS and similar stations made preparations to invest and begin the application process towards achieving superpower status.

Superpower was not a new idea. As radio broadcasting bloomed in the early 1920s, none other than RCA president David Sarnoff offered up the idea of superpower broadcasting as an answer to the increasing financial woes of the fledgling medium. Standing firm against the call for a consumer tax on radios, Sarnoff argued that a chain of “half a dozen or three high-power broadcast stations,” located on opposing coasts and strategic positions within the United States could provide quality service to the entire country. Such a network would end anxiety over mounting operating costs. It would quell protests from the American Society of Composers, Authors, and Publishers, who lobbied hard against radio stations over financial compensation for the performances of their artists’ work. Through these high-power stations, performers could have “the whole nation as a forum,” Sarnoff claimed. “Broadcasting” in this way, he argued, “will be primarily supported by the radio industry itself and from its returns on the sale of radio apparatus,” as well as other “great public spirited Americans, who will see in this vast instrumentality of the air another means to become public benefactors.”⁴

Long a bastion for experimentation in radio telephony, General Electric’s station WGY in Schenectady, New York began experiments with superpower in the mid-1920s. In July 1925, they became the first station in the United States authorized by the Department of Commerce to experiment with 50,000 watts power. By August of 1927 they doubled their output with the construction of a 100,000-watt transmitter; by 1930

⁴ “Continuance of Broadcasting Depends Upon Paying for Talent,” *The New York Times*, February 3, 1924, 9; “Plan to Pay Performers Introduced Through WEA,” *The New York Times*, February 24, 1924, 15; “Sees Radio Puzzle Met by Super-Broadcast,” *The New York Times*, April 24, 1924, 30. Of course, the high-power stations Sarnoff envisioned would be RCA stations funded by the sale of RCA radios.

through the grant of an experimental license from the Federal Radio Commission, WGY went on the air with a series of programs broadcasting with 150,000 watts of power. In March of that year, under the call letters W2XAG they broadcast musical programs for one week at four o'clock each morning with 200,000 watts, choosing the early morning to minimize potential interference with surrounding stations' signals. Engineers at GE created a 1000 kW, water-cooled power radiotron that *The Science News-Letter* called "the greatest single impetus to the art of high-powered broadcasting." The massive transmitting plant, requiring 100 gallons of water per second pumped through its vacuum tubes to keep from overheating, reproduced an "overall fidelity of tone . . . unequalled." Its ability to "reproduce faithfully the overtones of any such instrument," preserved the "identity of musical instruments" because "higher harmonies which color the tone of each instrument are not lost on the way through the various stages of the transmitter."⁵

Sarnoff's lobbying for super-power was not far-fetched; it was short-sighted and premature. Radio manufacturing interests could never support the medium on its own and no public benefactor emerged to make any significant contribution in the manner Sarnoff envisioned. WGY's experiments, however, proved technology had advanced far enough to insert superpower into the national dialogue on radio broadcasting. Addressing the Institute of Radio Engineers in the fall of 1930, former FRC member, O.H. Caldwell claimed, "We cannot depend upon little 500-watt broadcasting stations that use barely as much power as the electric toaster on one's breakfast table to render radio service more than a few miles radius." The pressing issue of interference, remedied little by the Radio Act of 1927, made support for superpower broadcasting all the more prescient. "Since we can satisfactorily operate only three 500-watts stations on the same

⁵ "New Radio Station Has Highest Power," *The Science News-Letter*, 17, no. 466 (March 15, 1930), 167.

wavelength in the entire United States without mutual interference,” Caldwell added, “it is evident that any wavelength carrying such a group of little stations is a wavelength virtually wasted.”⁶

Before any station in the United States could make the necessary upgrades for an increase in wattage, powerful signals from across the Mexican border infiltrated the airwaves. In 1931 after being stripped of his medical license due in part to the promotion of his fraudulent impotence-curing goat gland surgery and other assorted medical quackery, Dr. John Brinkley sold his Milford, Kansas radio station KFKB and relocated to Villa Acuña, Mexico just across the border from Del Rio, Texas. There he constructed station XER which debuted that October with an initial transmitting power of 75,000 watts. The following year the Mexican government authorized a power increase to 500,000 watts making XER the most powerful radio station in the world. It interfered with the signals from WSB in Atlanta and WGN in Chicago. In the evenings, surrounding residents watched in awe as the tops of the station’s dual three hundred-foot towers emitted “luminous green emanations.” By 1935, under the new call letters XERA, Brinkley broadcast with 1,000,000 watts and “brushed aside the signals of WWL in New Orleans and KOA in Denver as if they were 98-watt weaklings.”⁷ Other stations popped up along the border including XEPN and its 150,000-watt transmitter and XEPN broadcasting with 100,000 watts power. By 1934, nine superpower stations dotted the Mexican border whose “aggregate power . . . was a whopping 2,432,000 watts, an astounding figure, considering that the combined wattage of all U.S. stations at that time

⁶ “Million Watt Broadcaster Seen as Next Step in Radio,” *The Science News-Letter*, 18, no. 503 (November 29, 1930), 340.

⁷ “‘Goat-Gland’ Doctor Sells Radio Station,” *The New York Times*, March 15, 1931; Gene Fowler and Bill Crawford, *Border Radio: Quacks, Yodelers, Pitchmen, Psychics, and Other Amazing Broadcasters of the American Airwaves* (Austin: University of Texas Press, 2002), 26-38, 44.

was a meager 1,700,000 watts.”⁸ These border blasters would not remain the lone superpower stations on the continent for long. In fact, through one man, America’s quest for superpower was about to come to fruition.

That man was Powel Crosley, Jr. of the Crosley Manufacturing Company in Cincinnati, Ohio. Born in September 1886, Crosley was a man with limitless entrepreneurial spirit. Twice a college drop-out, after trying his hand and failing at “more jobs than can be accurately recorded,” he succeeded in making a small fortune selling automobile accessories and developed a fascination with radio through his young son. In 1921, Crosley purchased a 20-watt transmitter and began broadcasting phonographic music from his home. “The success of relatively unimportant and inexpensive products convinced me that I should appeal to the masses rather than the classes,” Crosley remembered after noticing the disparity in prices between assembling a crystal set in the home and purchasing a manufactured set. Crosley wondered “how other men on salaries as small as mine could afford radios at prices I was asked. . . . I was confident radio was not a rich man’s toy and I believed that it should be within the reach of everyone.”⁹

Hiring two engineering students from the University of Cincinnati to design an inexpensive receiver, Crosley’s American Automobile Accessories company marketed its first pre-assembled crystal set for the 1921 Christmas shopping season. Calling it the “Harko,” initial retail prices hovered around \$20 before being reduced to \$9 for the set, or \$15 for the set, earphones, and antenna. Business proved so brisk, that Crosley’s company switched its energies to manufacturing radios full-time.¹⁰ By 1922, Crosley

⁸ *Ibid.*, 213.

⁹ Lawrence W. Lichty, “The Nation’s Station: A History of Radio Station WLW, Vol. I,” (PhD diss, Ohio State University, 1964), 26-33.

claimed to be the world's biggest manufacturer of radio sets. In March of that year the Department of Commerce awarded him a license to continue broadcasting under the call letters WLW. By 1924, the American Automobile Accessories name was dropped in favor of the Crosley Radio Corporation. It was at this time that customer complaints started trickling in concerning the short-comings of the tube-powered Harko, Sr.¹¹ Customers sent back their radios because "the single tube could not bring in what programs there were above the noise level of summer static."¹²

Crosley's solution was not to improve upon the Harko, Sr.'s design or any of the other models his company manufactured, but rather to increase the power of his station so owners of his inexpensive receivers could find his WLW on their listening dials. The FRC authorized WLW to broadcast at 50,000 watts in 1928, making it the first high-powered station in the region. Although an increase in power spiked sales of Crosley radios, by 1930 the company possessed just a ten percent share of the radio market. Undeterred, Crosley continued to heavily invest in the improvement of his facilities. "I feel that a broadcasting station is a tremendous means of developing goodwill," he commented at the dedication of his new transmitter and, "goodwill is essential in business. . . . Anything which creates goodwill, and so much goodwill, must be worth all the money we are spending for it."¹³

Crosley waited less than a year before making preparations to turn WLW into the most powerful radio station in the United States. In late spring 1932, he secured

¹⁰ *Ibid.*, 34-35.

¹¹ With the introduction of vacuum tube-driven home radios, Crosley manufactured an inexpensive tube-driven model dubbed the Harko, Sr. The original crystal set was renamed the Harko, Jr.

¹² *Ibid.*, 36-37; Gerald Piel, "Powel Crosley, Jr.," *Life Magazine* 22, no. 7 (February 17, 1947), 52.

¹³ "Radio Board Gives WLW 50,000 Watts," *The New York Times*, October 6, 1928, 27; Cynthia Keller, "Powel Crosley, Jr. and the Dawn of Wireless in Cincinnati," *Queen City Heritage* 55, no. 2 (Summer 1997), 14; "Crosley Tells Why Radio Stations are Willing to Run at Loss," *The New York Times*, November 18, 1928, 17.

authorization from the FRC to broadcast daily with 500,000 watts on an experimental basis. Much like WGY's experiments, the FRC relegated WLW's broadcasts to the early morning hours between 1:00 A.M. and 6:00 A.M. in efforts to prevent as much interference as possible. According to Lawrence Lichty, the foremost authority on the station's history, both the broadcasting industry and the FRC believed that if proved successful, WLW's tests could open up the possibility of ultra-high-power stations on cleared channels.¹⁴ Construction began on the transmitting plant in the spring of 1933 in Mason, Ohio, twenty-six miles to the northeast of Cincinnati. Acting as its aerial was an 831-foot steel tower, tapered at both ends and thirty-five feet wide at its mid-section, held in place by eight guy wires comprised of two-inch thick steel cable. Completion of the behemoth's construction took over a year. Twelve hundred gallons of distilled and Cincinnati municipal water pumped through the transmitter's 93 vacuum tubes per minute to keep them from overheating. A 75-foot spray pond lay next to the antenna, constructed to cool water piped from the city. Engineers estimated the plant might require 28,000 gallons of water a day during the summer just to compensate for losses to evaporation. As it stood, when in operation the transmitter required the circulation of 1,000,000 gallons of water daily and the movement from fans of 1,350,000 cubic feet of air hourly to keep cool and consumed 15,450,000 kW hours of electricity per year. "This much electricity," Lichty reported, "would furnish power to all the homes in a city of about 100,000 population at the 1934 rate of consumption." The plant was a half-million dollar gamble on the part of Crosley. Any interference with surrounding stations threatened the revocation of WLW's experimental license and a massive financial loss.¹⁵

¹⁴ "WLW Plans to Test Most Powerful Station," *The New York Times*, June 19, 1932, 5; Lichty, 242.

Night time tests proved successful enough that in April 1934 the FRC authorized the use of the transmitter during regular broadcast hours. That decision made interference inevitable. Furthermore, the massive signal radiating from the large tower produced spectacular side-effects in surrounding communities reminiscent of the accounts described in letters to WHAS in the station's early years. "Barbed-wire fences emitted sparks, light bulbs glowed in farm houses, rainspouts and bed springs played hot jazz," *Life Magazine* reported. Residents of Del Rio, Texas were familiar with such phenomena. Living in such close proximity to XERA's massive transmitter meant hearing the station's signal bleed through during phone calls while some residents in both Ohio and Texas claimed to pick up their respective stations through the metal fillings in their teeth.¹⁶ By December 1934, the new Federal Communications Commission ordered WLW to suspend night time broadcasting at full power by February the following year because it blanketed portions of Canada and stations such as CFRB in Toronto.¹⁷ Engineers offered a temporary solution by retrofitting to the tower a new \$30,000 directional aerial capable of suppressing the station's signal in certain areas – such as

¹⁵ Keller, "Powel Crosley, Jr.," 15-17; "Work Begins in Ohio on WLW's New Station," *The New York Times*, April 2, 1933, 8; "New Giant Among Broadcasters Goes on the Ohio Air This Week," *The New York Times*, April 29, 1934, 9; Lichty, 246.

¹⁶ Piel, "Powel Crosley, Jr.," 52; Fowler and Crawford, 44; Keller, 16-17. WHAS engineer Joe C. Fox relayed a similar situation to Terry Birdwhistell: "Out at J-town . . . we had an antenna run flat-top between two, two-hundred foot towers and you fed right in the middle. Right across the road from us, at the farmhouse over there, their wiring was parallel to Taylorsville Road and so was our antenna. And when we went up to fifty kilowatts, we'd been there for two or three days and I'd noticed that the man's front porch light seemed to be on over there pretty well daytime and night. I didn't think anything about it, I just thought, "Well, I wonder why he don't turn it off?" After we had been up to fifty kilowatts there for about a week, he came over one day and said, "You know, I can't turn my front porch light off?" What was happening, of course, was the power we were putting out on this flat-top antenna and his wiring in his porch light were parallel and it was just feeding into it by induction . . . didn't make any difference whether the switch was on or not."

¹⁷ "WLW Must Cut Power," *The New York Times*, December 23, 1934, 2; "WLW Radio Station Restricted," *The New York Times*, January 28, 1935, 3; Lichty, 249-250.

Toronto, Ontario, Canada – garnering FCC approval, and by late spring of 1935, WLW was once again broadcasting day and night with the full power of its transmitter.¹⁸

In October 1936, the FCC held hearings to discuss the continuation of clear channels and the issue of superpower. The Clear Channel Group, thirteen clear-channel stations including WHAS and WSM, argued that a minimum of power be set at 50,000-watts for clear channel stations. Opposing an increase to a minimum power of 500,000 watts on simple grounds of fairness, some cities and regions, the group argued, would be able to support superpower stations while others would not. “Part of the opposition,” surmised spokesperson Edwin W. Craig from WSM, “is . . . psychological. Five hundred thousand watts sounds like a lot of electricity,” although in theory, the leap to superpower should have “exactly the same order and the same proportionate effect as the leap from 5,000 to 50,000 watts.” Powel Crosley Jr. was incredulous in his testimony, stating that two years operation with such high-power “performed a definite and necessary function and as a meritorious institution should be preserved and encouraged.” The National Association of Regional Broadcast Stations opposed any such approval for power increases as did CBS president William Paley. Similar to the Clear Channel’s example, Paley offered an economic argument that allowance of superpower would serve only “to make the big fellow still stronger and the little fellow weaker.” The large capital investment and sustained increase in operating costs superpower demanded were out of reach to smaller regional broadcasters, leaving only the larger, profitable stations to take advantage. However, L.R. Bohr, president of NBC, differed in opinion than that of Paley or the Clear Channel Group. “If [superpower] produces hazards to our present methods

¹⁸ “WLW Resumes High Power,” *The New York Times*, May 19, 1935, 11.

of network operation,” Bohr said, “then let us adjust our methods to meet the public interest.”¹⁹

The hearings adjourned and it would be over a year before the Commission released a report on the proceedings. When it did, however, the report “gave out no new information . . . and offered no conclusions and no suggestions for future operation at higher power.” As a result, many in broadcasting felt an increase in the power minimum for clear channels was inevitable. The one objectionable phrase in the report that hinted otherwise expressed there should be “considerable caution” taken in “granting such powerful media” in the future. Fifteen stations disregarded that language and in 1938 submitted applications to the FCC seeking permission to broadcast with superpower. Among them were WSB in Atlanta, KDKA in Pittsburgh – which withdrew its application, WSM in Nashville, and WHAS in Louisville.²⁰

Eastwood

“This transmitter building,” Orrin W. Towner remembered while looking over photos of WHAS’s Eastwood transmitting plant one afternoon in 1980 with the University of Kentucky’s Terry Bridwhistell, “was designed for the gleam in the eye that we all had to go to 500-kilowatts.” On November 13, 1936 *The Louisville Times* Company purchased two tracts of land in Eastwood, Kentucky from William O. and Lucille Beaty for \$3,000. Acquiring 104 acres of rolling pasture broken up by the occasional stand of trees on November 15, 1928, the Beatys paid off the property’s

¹⁹ Orrin E. Dunlap, Jr., “Super-Power Race Stirs Debate Among Broadcasters: Watt a Riddle,” *The New York Times*, October 18, 1936, 12.

²⁰ Sol Taishoff, “FCC Orders Reallocation Hearing June 6,” *Broadcasting*, May 1, 1938, 11-12; U.S. Federal Communications Commission, Engineering Department, “Report on the Social and Economic Data Pursuant to the Informal Hearing on Broadcasting, Docket 4036, Beginning October 6, 1936,” (Washington D.C.: Government Printing Office, 1938), 112-114, quoted in Lichty, 256.

mortgage less than five years later and had failed to do but very little with the land afterwards.²¹ Indecision on the part of the FCC coupled with WLW's continued use of its large transmitter inspired WHAS to commission the local architectural firm Nevin, Morgan & Kolbrook and engineers from Western Electric and Bell Laboratories for the construction of a new state-of-the-art transmitting facility. A facility, WHAS hoped, would house a superpower transmitter.

A 1927 graduate of Kansas University in electrical engineering, Towner arrived in Louisville as an employee of Bell Laboratories. He had an extensive background in radio that included running his own small radio manufacturing company while in college and acting as chief engineer for Lawrence, Kansas station KFKU and Topeka, Kansas station WREN. Towner's first job with Bell Labs saw him touring the United States switching out antiquated tube oscillators with more modern and efficient ones composed of crystal. He was at the Jeffersontown plant during the flood, arriving to assist the station's engineers in keeping the transmitter on the air. The relationships Towner developed during the crisis helped secure him the position of technical supervisor for Bell in Louisville and he oversaw the installation of all electrical and transmitting equipment at Eastwood. In November of 1937, in the engineer's garage at Jeffersontown, WHAS chief engineer Howard E. Campbell was found dead beside his car from apparent carbon monoxide poisoning. Rather than relocate to Buenos Aires, Bell's next destination for

²¹ Towner interview; Deed of Sale from William O. Beaty and wife to Louisville Times Company, 10 November 1936 (filed 13 November 1936) Jefferson County, Kentucky Deed Book, p. 474-475, County Clerk's Office, Louisville, Kentucky.

him, Towner and his wife accepted Harris and Coulson's offer to fill Campbell's position as chief engineer.²²

Construction began in the spring of 1937 and continued through early 1938 with assembly of a shunt excited, 654-foot Blaw-Knox vertical steel tower completed first. Comprised of twelve orange sections, 37 feet 2 inches each, and eleven white sections, 18 feet 7 inches each, the tower tapered at its base where it balanced on a seven-inch-wide stainless steel ball secured to a twenty ton concrete base submerged below ground. Bell designed the tower to act as a giant lightning rod; in the event of a lightning strike, electricity radiated down the height of tower and out through a massive grounding system consisting of "hundreds of large copper wires buried underground radiating from the base of the antenna like the spokes of a wheel." All told, engineers buried twenty-seven miles of copper wire across thirty acres of soil surrounding the tower. People from surrounding counties drove out to watch "nimble mechanics" attach the final steel pier of the structure that stood taller than the Washington Monument and was the first of its kind ever to be erected.²³

Excavation and construction began soon after on a modern two-story industrial building. The interior of the first floor housed a state-of-the-art Western Electric 407A-2 50,000-watt transmitter enclosed behind stainless steel grating in which two 100 kW vacuum power tubes, one serving as part-time assistant to the other, generated the necessary radio frequency relayed 694 feet from the building to the antenna via a coaxial

²² "WHAS Engineer Experiments With Transmitter," *Courier-Journal*, February 1, 1938; Towner interview.

²³ "New WHAS Radio Station Under Construction in County," *The Jeffersonian*, May 13, 1937; "Huge Tower Acts Like a Lightning Rod," *Courier-Journal*, February 1, 1938. A replacement tower is still in use today. The original toppled over during a heavy rainstorm at 5:02 P.M. on April 15, 1985. To prevent a reoccurrence, the present tower is secured with four sets of guy wires at three equidistant points instead of the original's one. Baysinger, 3.

transmission line enclosed within six-inch copper piping. Touted as the first of its kind used commercially in the United States, Western Electric bragged that the new transmitter was as small as their original 5 kW transmitters were large, although the transmitter left room for little else on the first floor. Outside, an electric power plant generated electricity that flowed into the basement's electric converter boxes. Sharing the subterranean space were "centrifugal type water circulating pumps" which fed water through porcelain piping that wound across the basement's ceiling to the upper floor. The pumps pulled from a nearby artificial pond where a dam, "12 feet high and 157 feet long" helped contain the two million gallons of water needed to keep the transmitter cool. Also in the basement was an "air-conditioning plant for the transmitting building, high-voltage filter condenser rack with limiting resistors and thyrite surge absorber, nitrogen gas tanks and manifolds for transmission lines and condensers," and "distribution boards for the building service." A four-car garage attached to the left side of the building and an engineer's residence rested just behind the structure in an adjacent lot.²⁴

"It is the opinion of experts," the *Courier-Journal* reported, "that station WHAS is in an ideal position geographically and otherwise to win the first forthcoming permit for . . . expansion." Engineers enlarged the building of "ultra-modern design," to allow "ample provision for the improvement of equipment," should approval come from the FCC to increase power to 500,000 watts. "Two of the three transmission lines built to furnish power to the station from independent sources have a capacity sufficient to operate the 500-kilowatt equipment." Furthermore, "should the station eventually

²⁴ "WHAS's New Transmitter on Air Tuesday," *Courier-Journal*, February 1, 1938; Towner Interview; Will Whitmore, "Pioneer WHAS Pioneers Again," *Pick-Ups*, 3 no. 2, (January 1938), 20-21; *Jeffersonian*, May 17, 1937.

undergo this expansion, the new fifty kilowatt transmitter equipment will later serve as pre-amplifier to drive the more powerful stage.”²⁵

WHAS did not stop at just a new transmitting site but constructed new studio facilities as well resulting in the single largest investment the newspapers put towards its radio station at that time. In a feature on the new transmitter in *Pick-Ups*, Western Electric’s in-house publication, Lee Coulson justified the expense with an explanation that in part appeared aimed towards comments and concerns brought up in the 1936 FCC hearings: “There are those who say that stations make too much money, but they do not stop to think about the tremendous investments in broadcasting. Perhaps there is no other industry in which progress is so fast, and plant equipment becomes obsolete so rapidly.”

Going further, he elaborated:

In 1932 WHAS installed a new plant with 50,000 watts power. It was the last word in broadcasting, yet today it is necessary for us to retire this entire plant and install a new one, not because the old one has worn out but simply in order to take full advantage of technical development and to fulfill our obligation to the public and to the broadcasting franchise which we hold. . . . The new plant at WHAS called for an expenditure of almost \$600,000 . . . will it have to be replaced in another five years? More than likely it will.²⁶

Despite its large capital investment and past exemplary attempts to provide a public service above that of its peers, the FCC never granted WHAS or any other applicant a license to broadcast with superpower. “We were in hearings in ’38 and ’40, ’42 and ’45,” Towner remembered. “In all the hearings – I went to them all -- we won technically, [but] we lost politically because the opposition was all of the little stations

²⁵ *Courier-Journal*, February 1, 1938

²⁶ Whitmore, “Pioneer WHAS,” 38. In the article, Coulson breaks down some of the specific financial expenditures: \$250,000 for the transmitter and speech input equipment, \$30,000 for the tower and its revolving beacon, \$15,000 for *studio* speech input equipment (i.e. microphones, etc.), and \$12,000 for the construction of the dam, among other items such as a “lounge, reception room, studio furnishings, office furniture and equipment,” along with a massive organ and several concert pianos.

scared to death that this big monster was . . . going to gobble up all of their business.”²⁷ Although the FCC’s chief engineer, T.A.M. Craven had issued a report in 1937 recognizing “a need for increased signal intensity,” and “recommended that, in general, power increases are required to better the service to the public,” he admitted “social and economic factors involved in the use of 500 kilowatts may outweigh in importance engineering considerations,” and requested “instructions from the division as to its desires with respect to regulations on the question of superpower.”²⁸ Lobbying groups such as the National Association of Regional Broadcast Stations and later the Network Affiliates, Inc. made sure the economic and social arguments stayed front and center at each hearing. By October 1938, the FCC voted down WLW’s request for the renewal of its experimental license forcing Crosley to pursue legal action. The United States Court of Appeals dismissed the corporation’s suit ruling that “nothing in the commission’s action warranted the contention of WLW that the decision was arbitrary or capricious.”²⁹ Although there were future hearings, as Towner indicated, the court’s ruling was the death knell for superpower broadcasting in the United States.

Experiments Continue

Despite the setback, Eastwood’s updated equipment improved upon its predecessor and helped to better serve the immediate listening area as well as remote citizens flocking to University of Kentucky Listening Centers by broadcasting WHAS’s daily programs in increasing clarity and tone. Engineers flocked for a spell to observe the grounds of the state-of-the-art site, but as technology was always improving, these visits

²⁷ Towner interview. There was yet another hearing in 1946.

²⁸ “High-Power Wins Favor,” *The New York Times*, January 24, 1937.

²⁹ “Activities of FCC: Radio Monopoly Probe Delayed Until November 14 – Super-Power Voted Down,” *The New York Times*, October 23, 1938; “Super-Power Suit Lost by Crosley,” *The New York Times*, June 27, 1939.

dissipated not long after its completed construction. With superpower off the table, WHAS and its engineers returned to experimenting with a fervor approaching that of its earlier years, beginning with a technology that possessed the potential to unite the newspaper and radio industries into one: radio facsimile.

In late 1924 news first spread of the sending of photographs and printed word by radio. Developed apart by two separate men, Richard H. Ranger and C. Francis Jenkins, RCA – Ranger’s employer – established transoceanic and transcontinental facsimile service within four years.³⁰ By the next decade, improvements in the technology had many wondering what “such a system . . . might do to the mechanics of newspaper publishing.” By 1938, costs of a facsimile receiver were “within range of ordinary pocketbooks,” with some built into the cabinets of the radios themselves. They would “automatically turn on when the aural programs of ordinary broadcasting . . . ended for the night” and print, on one continuous sheet, “the various facsimile announcements. . . . Not merely printing as obtained from a teletype machine but . . . replicas of the pages of a newspaper, with headlines, captions, layouts of pictures and all of the other familiar marks of journalism.”³¹

An employee of the *Courier-Journal* and *The Louisville Times*, Lee Collins developed his own method of facsimile transmission and Towner agreed to conduct experiments to explore its feasibility. Towner commandeered a 500-watt short-wave transmitter engineers used on occasion used to broadcast music for tests. At the end of

³⁰ “Will Wireless Next Bring Us Radio Sight?” *The New York Times*, December 7, 1924, 1; “Atlantic Radio Picture Service Expected Within a Few Weeks,” *The New York Times*, April 15, 1926, 1; “Hearing to be Given to Radio Corporation,” September 15, 1928, 23.

³¹ “Facsimile Transmission Hailed as a Revolution,” *The Science News-Letter*, 29, no. 794 (June 27, 1936), 410; Robert D. Potter, “Newspapers by Radio,” *The Science News-Letter*, 34, no. 10 (September 3, 1938), 154. In 1939, Crosley marketed a facsimile receiver for \$79.50. “Facsimile Device Shown,” *The New York Times*, January 23, 1939, 20.

June 1939 the FCC granted an experimental license to WHAS issuing the station the call letters W9XWT and the frequency 25,500 kilocycles. Towner saw facsimile transmission as “technically feasible, but . . . not practical.” Technical limitations necessitated the printed news bulletins be brief, not more than four to five 8” x 11” pages of content Towner remembered, and therefore engineers hypothesized they might increase newspaper sales as “listeners will be forced to purchase their daily newspapers for more detailed reports of the news as it occurs.” Newspaper and technical staff received facsimile receivers “so that a check can be made on the progress and success of the experimenting.” Although a facsimile transmission went out for almost a decade, the technology never made it into the homes of WHAS listeners. Towner discovered that the majority of employees given receivers – including Barry Bingham, Sr., Mark Ethridge, and Lisle Baker – failed to change the paper once it had run out of its initial supply. If the technology failed to engage these figures, Towner realized, it could not be counted on to engage “the common garden variety” listener either. Facsimile transmission was phased out although as of 1949 WHAS still retained its license and call letters.³²

Another aspect of experimentation at Eastwood lay in tests using frequency modulation or FM. First demonstrated in 1935 by technical genius Edwin H. Armstrong, frequency modulation was a new form of radio broadcasting with unprecedented static-free tone, clarity, and volume. RCA’s David Sarnoff encouraged Armstrong’s decade-long research but turned away from both the inventor and FM after his emergence from the laboratory. By then, RCA was investing all of its attention into television and

³² Towner interview; Hugh Morris, “WHAS Starts on the Road to Facsimile Broadcasting,” *Courier-Journal Sunday Magazine*, July 9, 1939, No Page Number. Found in Louisville Free Public Library Newspaper Clippings File, Radio Station WHAS, Book 4; “Initial Decisions,” *Broadcasting*, July 4, 1949, 68.

lobbying the FCC for exclusive rights to the upper section of the broadcasting spectrum; the very section FM required for broadcasting. The 1939 success of an Armstrong-funded, 50,000-watt FM station in Alpine, New Jersey kicked off an application boom and forced the FCC to withdraw Channel 1 from the spectrum portion allotted to television to accommodate the influx. By February 1944, WHAS applied and received a construction permit to erect an FM antenna to its tower at Eastwood.³³

According to former WHAS engineer Larry Baysinger, FCC approval of WHAS's FM construction permit and license application was a solicitation on part of the commission for help in determining the parameters for the new FM broadcast band. From 1944 to 1945 WHAS conducted tests from Eastwood under the experimental call letters W9XEK at 92.3 MHz with a multi-element FM antenna and 1,000 watts power. Tests by WHAS and other experimental stations across the country resulted in the relocation of the FM band from "the 40 to 50 MHz range to the 88 to 108 MHz band" still in use today. In 1947, engineers installed a new 10,000-watt Western Electric FM

³³ Erik Barnouw, *The Golden Web*, 40-42, 129-130; "Actions of the Federal Communications Commission February 19 to February 25 Inclusive," *Broadcasting*, February 28, 1944, 68. Ever the colorful storyteller, Joe C. Fox – Eastwood's first resident engineer -- relayed another story to Terry Birdwhistell concerning the installation of the FM antenna: "The bottom of that tower is grounded but the top of it has got 50,000 watts of power radiating and we put some FM antennas on the tower out there. . . . And the electricians that were putting the antennas on -- of course they set two or three feet out from the tower, the FM antennas did, and you're sitting back on the tower itself with 50,000 watts -- and we warned the electricians, 'Now be careful that you don't get a short between this little pick-up antenna and the tower because if you do, you'll burn something up.' So you can imagine one guy five hundred feet up there with his legs wrapped around the tower and a belt running and he's reaching way out there and there's nothing between him and the ground down there but our air. And he got his screwdriver out and when he did he pulled off an arch [spark] . . . and the program that was on the air at the time happened to be "A Man on the Street" broadcast and that arch started talking! I mean, repeating the audio. Pete French had walked up to somebody and said "And what is your name, sir?" When that arch came out and this voice out of the heavens said, "And what is your name, sir?" we almost lost an electrician then! He thought he was already gone! I tell you one thing, he lost no time getting down off that tower and when he came in his face was snow white, just chalky white. He certainly had a change in his attitude that day!"

transmitter at Eastwood and through 1950 WHAS operated the first commercial FM station in the South, WCJT.³⁴

The Sale

In November of 1945, Barry Bingham made a public announcement for the planned construction of a new facility to house his family's newspapers, the Standard Gravure Corporation, and WHAS. Consulting with Joseph Kolbrook of Louisville, Lockwood-Greene Engineers, Inc. of New York designed a two-structure office and industrial complex spread over 250,000 square feet. A modern six-story building fronting Broadway on Sixth Street downtown would house the offices with WHAS commandeering the top two floors; a four-story mechanical complex attached at its rear. Architects designed the structures as separate entities to isolate the vibrations of the papers' and Standard Gravure's new printing presses, prohibiting them from interfering with radio broadcasts. For WHAS, the new move anticipated an expansion into "both frequency modulation and television." The finished project -- completed in 1949, two years later than initial predictions -- added a seventh floor to the office building and an overall square footage of 333,128 square feet. "It has the latest in lighting, air conditioning and heating facilities," *The New York Times* reported, "in addition to the most up-to-date mechanical equipment used in publishing a metropolitan daily newspaper." The building also came with an estimated price tag of over \$3,000,000 which, proud as he was of the new complex, gnawed at Barry Bingham. "It was a financial thing altogether," he later confessed. "At that point we were going to have to spend a great deal of money putting up [the] building and we did not have large reserves

³⁴ Baysinger, 2.

on hand. We had to go and borrow a very large sum of money and pay a good deal of interest on it.”³⁵

As Bingham biographers Susan E. Tift and Alex Jones explain, up until that point in his life Barry Bingham had no experience with debt. He attended the prestigious Middlesex boarding school, graduated from Harvard College, and as a young man traveled the world like many wealthy members of his generation did. When his father passed away Bingham inherited the family property in Glenview, the newspapers, the Standard Gravure printing operation, and WHAS free of burdensome inheritance taxes which the elder Bingham’s estate covered. He possessed a commendable “willingness to forgo large profits” from his companies in exchange for outputs of excellence that betrayed the geographical location of their origin. Yet, he was leery of the increasing investments radio broadcasting required, a point he first expressed in a 1935 letter to his father.³⁶ To Bingham, television carried with it the same baggage. As Towner recalled:

We had a television construction permit. The longest construction permit without any construction in the country and the day was dawning when somebody would have to move. We heard some interesting reasons why they shouldn’t spend the money. . . . There were many in the upper staff levels that were very opposed.³⁷

When it was clear the newspapers required outside financing for the completion of the building’s construction, Bingham, Ethridge, and chief financial officer Lisle Baker looked to ease the potential financial burden by offering WHAS up for sale. “It was a very large debt for those days in proportion to the kind of earnings we were able to

³⁵ “New WHAS Quarters Included in \$3,000,000 Building Plans,” *Broadcasting*, November 26, 1945, 91; John Popham, “*Courier-Journal* Opening Big Plant,” *The New York Times*, July 10, 1948, 16; Bingham interview. Standard Gravure printed color inserts for numerous newspapers and magazines such as the *Christian Science-Monitor* and *Parade*.

³⁶ See Chapter 2.

³⁷ Towner interview. The *Courier-Journal* and Louisville Times Company first received a television construction permit on September 19, 1946. “*Courier-Journal* Given Video Station Permit,” *Broadcasting*, September 23, 1946.

make,” Bingham explained. “So we made fundamentally a decision that we would consider a sale if we could get the proper kind of offer.”³⁸

The first proper offer came in 1948 from none other than the Crosley Corporation, by then a division of the Aviation Corporation [AVCO Manufacturing Corporation]. In 1945, AVCO purchased the entire holdings of Powel Crosley, Jr. and his family for a purported \$22,000,000 giving them control over radio stations WLW, WLWA (FM), and the Crosley-owned WINS in New York as well as television station WLWT. AVCO kept Crosley as a subsidiary company and continued its operation with “the same personnel and . . . the same identification,” even following “the same policies of the past.”³⁹ On September 27, 1948, *Broadcasting* reported that negotiations between WHAS and Crosley for a transfer of ownership had begun. “We often get offers,” the magazine quoted Ethridge as saying. “[Crosley President James D.] Shouse made us one and we decided to look into it.” The price negotiated was a purported \$2,000,000 and included Eastwood, FM and facsimile licenses, and WHAS’s construction permit for television. All parties involved expressed initial concern that a geographical overlap in primary coverage between WLW and WHAS would prevent the sale.⁴⁰

Early the following month revealed more specific information surrounding the negotiations. *Broadcasting* reported the sale price fixed at \$1,925,000 in addition to a “10-year lease at \$80,000 per-year, of three floors of the new *Courier-Journal* and *Times* Building, to be occupied early next year.” Crosley planned to retain the entire staff of WHAS just as AVCO had with personnel from its stations, and place its offices on the

³⁸ Tift and Jones, *The Patriarch*, 199-200; Bingham interview.

³⁹ “Crosley is Sold to Aviation Corp.,” *The New York Times*, June 20, 1945, 20; “Avco to Acquire Assets of Crosley,” *Broadcasting*, October 14, 1946, 81.

⁴⁰ “WHAS Sale to AVCO Near Completion,” *Broadcasting*, September 27, 1948, 4.

fifth floor of the Louisville building, with AM and FM radio on the sixth and television on the seventh floor. The separate network affiliations of WHAS and WLW now convinced many that overlap in coverage was a non-issue; however, the transfer was subject to an approval hearing should any other bidder submit a counter offer. The FCC established a requirement advertising such transactions to encourage open competitive bidding as a direct result of AVCO's purchase of Crosley three years prior. "Television is a new and exciting but a very expensive medium," *Broadcasting* quoted Bingham as saying. "It will perhaps change the nature of radio . . . but it will probably be some time before it becomes profitable for the operators. Besides," Bingham said, transferring his financial fears to television from radio, "to install television requires a very large outlay of capital." In closing he added, "We would rather invest our money and devote our energies to those enterprises which are more closely allied with newspaper publishing and printing."⁴¹

In December, under the commission's AVCO Rule, Fort Industry president George B. Storer matched Crosley's offer. Controlling seven AM stations and three television stations, Fort Industry's application "was almost certain to prompt an FCC hearing to examine [the two stations] qualifications on a comparative basis," *Broadcasting* announced. Storer desired so much to acquire WHAS out from under his rival Crosley he expressed willingness to the commission to "dispose of certain radio facilities" should they move to place a numerical limit on station ownership. If the

⁴¹ "WHAS Sale: \$1,925,000 Transaction Pends," *Broadcasting*, October 4, 1948, 26. In its official application to the commission, the Courier-Journal and Louisville Times Company stated: "Consideration of long-term business policy, and particularly the desirability, under present conditions of postwar expansion, of concentrating in a single-type enterprise – the publishing business – has led the transferor to the conclusion that it is appropriate to sell its radio interests." "WHAS Sale: Total of Four Ask Approval," *Broadcasting*, October 18, 1948, 36.

commission granted approval to Fort Industry, Storer announced he would make Allen L. Haid, managing director of his Fairmont, West Virginia station WMMN, the new general manager of WHAS but declined to discuss in detail any other proposed changes in staff.⁴²

Complicating matters further, less than two weeks after Fort Industry entered the conversation comedian, actor, and entertainer Bob Hope filed an application to match the \$1,925,000 offer from both broadcasting conglomerates. Having formed the corporation Hope Productions, Inc. of which he was sole owner and president, Hope announced he would switch WHAS's network affiliation from CBS to ABC, a proposition that excited ABC president Mark Woods. In addition, Hope Productions would "make available to local Louisville residents or organizations a stock interest in the corporation" and bring in the University of Louisville as an unofficial partner although when sought for comment, J. Verser Conner, chairman of the university's trustees stated he was unaware of any such agreement. Hope felt his extensive experience in radio and the burgeoning television medium made him an ideal candidate to own a radio and television station and made this evident within his application. "The applicant is keenly aware of the responsibilities of a broadcasting station in presenting programs designed to serve the public interest," the application read. "At the same time the applicant has a keen realization of the importance of broadcasting in providing entertainment programs of the finest character." In reference to television, "the applicant recognizes a keen responsibility for providing programs which will maintain the highest standards which Station WHAS set forth in its past operations." Promising a "well-rounded service of diversified program material," the application even made light of Hope's intention to emphasize local programming and talent. Throughout its entirety, the application did little to hide Hope Productions'

⁴² "WHAS Bid: Fort Industry Matches Crosley," *Broadcasting*, December 13, 1948, 21.

supposed advantage over its competitors: “The experience of Bob Hope in the entertainment field will be invaluable in counseling the applicant corporation on the manner in which television productions will be carried out.”⁴³

The FCC scheduled a competitive hearing of the three interests for February 28, 1949 to consider the respective issues of coverage overlap and limits of ownership from Crosley and Fort Industry. “Other issues concern inquiry into price, contracts and manner of payment, and plans of each bidder for staffing and programming the stations,” *Broadcasting* stated. To save time the FCC also added an overview of WHAS-TV’s request for extension of its construction permit to the proceedings. Such a request raised a “question of the company’s diligence in proceeding with construction.”⁴⁴ The influx of competition irked the Crosley Corporation which petitioned the commission to repeal the rule named after its parent company and “eliminate the competing bidders . . . from the WHAS competition.” The petition contested the FCC had “no authority in law to require . . . Crosley Broadcasting Corp. to engage in a competitive hearing.” A comparative hearing on the three interested parties would serve nothing more than to “deprive [Courier-Journal] of its property without due process of law contrary to the provisions of the Constitution.” Their exasperation rose in part from Hope’s request to delay the proceedings for sixty days as the actor’s many commitments and “‘unremunerated public service’ appearances would not permit him to make adequate preparation by Feb. 28.”⁴⁵

⁴³ “Hope for WHAS: Actor Makes Bid,” *Broadcasting*, December 20, 1948, 23. On the same page is a small column titled “WAVE Beats: Claim Three on WHAS Sale.” The article stated that WAVE news reports scooped three “successive developments in the pending sale of WHAS Louisville.” Although the *Courier-Journal* reported on the proposed sale, both Bingham and Birdwhistell acknowledge during their interview that many in Louisville were unaware of the pending sale.

⁴⁴ “WHAS Case: Hearing to Start Feb. 28,” *Broadcasting*, January 31, 1949, 42; “WHAS Sale: Crosley Broadcasting Corp. Only Bidder Left,” *Broadcasting*, February 28, 1949, 31.

⁴⁵ “WHAS Bidders: Crosley Asks AVCO Repeal,” *Broadcasting*, February 7, 1949, 32.

The Courier-Journal and Louisville Times Company supported Crosley's decision to petition and in doing so made it clear where their allegiances lie. The FCC denied Hope's petition to delay and as a result the actor withdrew his competitive bid two weeks before the comparative hearing.⁴⁶ Stating a "desire to concentrate on television and improvement of AM properties, plus 'nationwide economic changes and trends,'" on February 21 *Broadcasting* reported that Fort Industry withdrew its offer as well. The withdrawal of its competition did not signal a win for Crosley. The FCC decided to proceed with hearings concerning its initial issues with the transfer of ownership.⁴⁷

The first two days of hearings covered WHAS's delayed television construction permit. Towner testified that the station could not begin construction on facilities because the new building was not yet complete. "We don't want to have to install at Third and Liberty and turn right around and tear it out and put it in the place it should go," Towner argued.⁴⁸ Lisle Baker testified that Bingham's motivation for the sale stemmed from a desire to achieve "complete financial self-containment." The \$6,000,000 bond issue for the new building's oft-delayed construction and therefore ballooning costs shattered a thirty-year span of no debt within the Bingham family enterprise. A sale "provided the means of making a substantial reduction in the amount of . . . outside financing," Baker stated. For his part, Crosley President James D. Shouse testified to FCC Examiner Leo Resnick that the corporation would transform WHAS into more of a regional station like that of WLW with "operations to a greater extent tailored for the entire service area." Crosley hoped to attract more advertising and therefore raise

⁴⁶ "Bob Hope Denied Plea for WHAS Postponement," *Broadcasting*, February 7, 1949, 86; "Hope Withdraws WHAS Application," *Broadcasting*, February 21, 1949, 32.

⁴⁷ "WHAS Sale: Crosley Broadcasting Corp. Only Bidder Left," *Broadcasting*, February 28, 1949, 31

⁴⁸ Towner interview.

revenues in doing so, Shouse claimed. Although Shouse stated Crosley did not intend to make changes to WHAS personnel, he did mention increases in the station's current rate charges and volume of commercial programming.⁴⁹

The last phase of hearings, begun in April, centered on coverage overlap. Crosley representatives argued hard that dual ownership of the two stations did not fall under the FCC's duopoly rule. However, confidence duopoly was a non-issue withered to dismay when FCC Examiner Resnick issued his decisive report on the hearings on June 21:

To permit a single corporation to own and operate these two powerful stations, which operate on two of the nation's 24 most desirable clear-channel frequencies, and which serve, to a considerable extent, the same vast areas and populations, would be to render Sec. 3.35 [duopoly rule] a nullity and to abandon the Commission's long established policy in favor of competition and against concentration of control.⁵⁰

Resnick did not see the potential for overlap in each interest's FM and television properties. The duopoly rule applied to AM broadcasting. The Commission could have issued its approval if "listeners in overlap areas had 'abundance' of service from other stations, particularly 1-A clear-channel stations." As it stood, a population of 282,346 within the overlap received no other stations than that of WHAS or WLW. Separate network affiliation did little more, Resnick argued than to "tend to enable [the stations] to retain or secure more listeners in the overlap areas than if they had the same network affiliation," and therefore was not considered in the ruling.⁵¹

Incensed, Shouse issued a response to the ruling stating:

To deny a transfer involving all the properties concerned because of a technical problem pertaining only to the amplitude service indicates that the examiner's report concerned itself primarily with an interpretation of the Commission's rule

⁴⁹ "WHAS: Hearing on Louisville Purchase Underway," *Broadcasting*, March 7, 1949, 27.

⁵⁰ Larry Christopher, "WHAS Hearing: Crosley Defines Overlap," *Broadcasting*, April 11, 1949, 51; Resnick quoted in "FCC Would Ban WHAS Sale to WLW," *Broadcasting*, June 27, 1949, 4.

⁵¹ *Ibid.*, 4.

which I do not believe was intended at the time the rule was formulated some years ago.⁵²

Both Crosley and WHAS filed exceptions to Resnick's report and planned oral arguments to present in front of the Commission yet again. As these preparations were under way, WHAS celebrated its 27th birthday in its new seven studio complex housed in the completed \$10 million *Courier-Journal, Louisville Times*, and WHAS Building. "Nearly a half-mile of fluorescent tubing" lit the studios which operated on over 700 vacuum tubes connected by an approximate 100 miles of wiring. One studio room held daily live performances and had a capacity of 165 persons. There was also a musical library with "17,598 orchestrations, 2,000 special arrangements, 13,900 vocal copies, 10,630 phonograph records and more than 17,500 musical selections on electrical transcriptions."⁵³

After hearing oral arguments from both parties on September 9, the Commission issued an identical decision to that of Examiner Resnick's two months prior. Despite some interest expressed by a syndicate comprising "H. Leslie Atlas, CBS Central Division vice president; P.K. Wrigley, chewing gum magnate and part-owner of WIND Chicago; and Gene Autry, cowboy impresario and broadcaster," the Commission's decision left WHAS without a buyer.⁵⁴ Bingham expressed an interest to conduct a partial sale but that failed to attract any offers as well; WHAS remained under Bingham control.

⁵² "WHAS: Crosley's Shouse Contends Duopoly Doesn't Apply," *Broadcasting*, July 4, 1949, 42.

⁵³ "WHAS Sale: Crosley, Station Owners Ask Oral Argument," *Broadcasting*, July 25, 1949, 74; "WHAS Studios: Dedicated on 27th Birthday," *Broadcasting*, July 25, 1949, 29.

⁵⁴ "FCC Turns Down WHAS Sale to WLW," *Broadcasting*, September 26, 1949, 4; "NBC Buys KMPC; New Group Seeks WHAS," *Broadcasting*, October 17, 1949, 4.

The Future

The story of WHAS's almost-sale is difficult to understand. The answer as to why it was attempted is clear: a fear of large debt and the untold but necessary investments television required – plus the continual upgrading of radio facilities – unnerved Barry Bingham. His newspapers were the crown jewels of his family's enterprise and his father's legacy which he intended to continue on to his children. Evidence of the increasing expense and investment in radio supports Bingham's trepidation about the future of the technology and that of television. During the Crosley/WHAS sale hearing, WHAS director Victor Sholis stated during his testimony that the station had already invested \$275,000 into television despite the incompleteness of its intended facilities. Towner predicted that "by date of operation" investment in television "will total some \$306,712 and that additional sums will have to be spent soon after for additional equipment as operation expanded." All of these expenditures before a single program had yet to air.⁵⁵

However, if Bingham biographers are to be believed, Barry Bingham enjoyed, basked even, in the attention, praise, and prestige his family's enterprises brought him.⁵⁶ If anything, the growth of WHAS served as an additional channel for receiving such accolades and feeding his ego. The station's contribution to education within Kentucky and its performance during the flood resulted in showers of praise. Trade journals and prominent figures within the industry wrote or spoke of WHAS with reverence, often using the adjective "pioneer" when referencing it, as in "the pioneer station WHAS." The FRC and FCC fast-tracked any WHAS request for frequency reassignment,

⁵⁵ "WHAS Bidding: Hearing on Louisville Purchase Underway," 66.

⁵⁶ See Tift and Jones, *The Patriarch* and Marie Brenner's *House of Dreams* for profuse examples.

licensing, or construction. How Bingham could let go of such an inlet for pride and vanity over the matter of borrowing money can only be described as perplexing.

Just as perplexing is the about-face that occurred after the Commission's ruling. Tift and Jones claim Bingham began spinning a tall tale of how the FCC refused to let him sell WHAS because "the station's public service record was just too good to risk losing to new owners." In his interview with Birdwhistell, Towner claims executives gave him the go ahead to purchase whatever television equipment he saw fit before the decision was handed down by the Commission.⁵⁷ In early 1950 *Broadcasting* quoted

Mark Ethridge:

The circumstances under which we were willing 16 months ago to sell WHAS have changed entirely. Our own picture is much brighter and so is television's. Even while negotiations for the sale of the station have been going on, we have been pushing the completion of our television station, as is obvious from the progress on the tower. We expect to be on the air in late February with our own and with the CBS television programs.⁵⁸

Just what changed to make the picture brighter for the newspaper executives remains unclear. What is clear, however, is that like radio, television found its footing and turned out enormous profits for the Bingham enterprise. And for a few decades more, local media remained under guidance and control of the Bingham family.

⁵⁷ Tift and Jones, 200; Towner interview.

⁵⁸ "WHAS Not For Sale: Taken Off Market," *Broadcasting*, January 9, 1950, 13.

CONCLUSION

NEARING THE APEX

On the evening of July 1, 1942, friends and staff of WHAS radio, the *Courier-Journal* and *The Louisville Times* newspapers gathered at the Louisville Country Club to say goodbye to Credo Harris. After twenty years, increasing age and health concerns had taken their toll. Although he agreed to remain as counsel to both newspapers and the radio station, Harris decided the time was right for retirement and handed over his responsibilities to Lee Coulson. He looked forward to the future, a return to writing fiction, and pursuing other activities not attached to radio. Serving in Washington D.C. in the Office of Facts and Figures, Barry Bingham presented in absentia a watch and a cocker-spaniel to his father's old friend and colleague. Mark Ethridge presented him with a leather-bound scrap-book entitled "Microphone Memoirs" named after Harris's sixth and final book. Published in late 1937 by the Bobbs-Merrill Company of Indianapolis, Harris's *Microphone Memoirs* comprised of a series of endearing, humorous, and intimate recollections of WHAS's earliest years. The scrap-book contained reminiscences from friends and colleagues such as Bingham, Ethridge, Mayor Wilson Wyatt, former President of the United States Herbert Hoover, as well as executives from both NBC and CBS. Despite the cordiality developed over the 1920s between Harris and Hoover, which extended to Hoover's personal request that Harris

serve on the first Federal Radio Commission – a position Robert W. Bingham declined for his friend – the former president’s complimentary remarks paled to one which Harris treasured most of all. Handwritten on unadorned White House stationary, President Franklin D. Roosevelt expressed his gratitude for Harris’s service:

You were a pioneer in a field of communication which is still in its infancy and you have witnessed and been a participant in remarkable achievements. I wish for you many years of happiness and contentment as you watch the onward march of events in the sphere of your long and distinguished service.¹

Harris’s retirement signaled the beginning to the conclusion of the most significant period in the history of WHAS radio. His passionate pursuit of quality service to the listening community was almost unmatched. “Credo saw the vision of what [radio] could do and he developed it beautifully from the start,” Orrin Towner remembered. “He saw programming capabilities and he set standards then that were used for years and years and years. . . . It’s a shame he wasn’t immortal.”² Under the supervision of such an imaginative and high-minded individual, WHAS attempted and more often than not succeeded in providing entertaining music programming, sports reporting, and news bulletins. Every Sunday WHAS offered up its microphone to religious figures from all denominations to preach words of faith to thousands beyond that of their own congregations. Holding a belief in the utmost importance of education, the station, in conjunction with universities from across Kentucky, donated equipment, money, and air time to help ensure access to educational and informative radio for thousands throughout the commonwealth and the Ohio Valley region. The station understood the needs of its

¹ Jack Turner, “Harris, WHAS Director, Retires After Twenty Years,” *Courier-Journal*, July 2, 1942; “Twenty Years at Helm of WHAS Ends With Harris’ Retirement,” *The Louisville Times*, July 2, 1942. Because of the reputation he developed in the radio field, *Microphone Memoirs* became the one of the most popular books of Harris’s oeuvre. As with all of his other works, it has long been out of print. Unfortunately the scrapbook given to him by Ethridge has not been found.

² Towner interview.

rural audience and the importance of agriculture within Kentucky and therefore fostered an increased focus on agricultural programming. Even the average citizen, either in personal distress or in search of lost loved ones or property could turn to WHAS for help. These values constituted the kind of civic-minded service Harris helped create at WHAS.

Some standards Harris tried but failed to set. Often such efforts stemmed from an adherence to matters of good taste. After hearing Will Rogers proclaim, “These shoes are so comfortable that when I put them on in the morning, my corns look up at me and smile” in the middle of a shoe company advertisement, Harris wrote CBS and announced WHAS would never air another Will Rogers program. It took a personal apology from the entertainer himself to change Harris’s mind. Other instances involved arguments over semantics and Harris’s pursuit of accuracy, down to the minutest detail. He fought for years to convince Kentuckians that the correct pronunciation for “Derby” was in fact “Darby,” and could not be persuaded otherwise even after University of Kentucky Professor of Literature L.L. Dantzler devoted the entirety of his fifteen-minute program, “How Do You Pronounce It,” to the word’s origins and concluded the former was the correct pronunciation. He argued for dropping the use of the term broadcast because too many announcers and journalists misused it in its past tense. Reading and hearing “broadcasted” was too much for Harris and he helped implement the terms “radiocast” and “radiocasting” in its place which had some prominent use for several years. Once, Harris even called “long distance the Washington delegation of a Balkan government to find out how to pronounce the name of an assassinated politician to avoid

mispronunciation in a newscast.” If nothing else, his was a colorful tenure of uncertainty, surprise, serendipity, and experimentation.³

Such passionate pursuit for quality and detail represented a great deal of what Harris infused into WHAS throughout its first twenty years and his retirement came on the cusp of WHAS summing the peak in both its influence and popularity. During his testimony in April 1946 before the Federal Communications Commission, Lee Coulson stated that WHAS housed a staff of 157 persons; the largest in its history and, as the executive manager was quick to point out, comparable in size with the leading stations in the nation’s larger markets. Five people comprised the station’s Sales department; 102 worked in Programming and 36 comprised the Engineering department. Through the efforts of such a large staff, WHAS sent out an average of 175 live local programs a week; nine staff writers churned out twelve brief local newscasts daily, culled from seven news agencies, investigations from three journalists on the local beat, and the cooperation of over forty-five local newspaper editors that acted as “correspondents from the rural areas of Kentucky and Indiana.” While Coulson stressed “sustaining [meaning at the station’s expense] local originations receive as much consideration as our most lucrative commercial broadcasts,” by 1944 WHAS devoted 44.9% of its total broadcasting time to network programming compared to the 24% live local programming comprised.⁴ The delayed completed construction of the studios and offices at Sixth and Broadway once

³ Ladd, “Catwhiskers and Static;” Reminiscences of Elmer G. Sulzer, 3; Harris, 177-179. Demonstrating the evolution of advertising content the station deemed in good taste, in 1949 the Temperance League of America called for the revocation of WHAS’s license, accusing it of carrying beer advertising but allowing no time for temperance messages. See “WHAS Answers: Asks FCC to Dismiss Temperance Case,” *Broadcasting*, November 7, 1949, 43.

⁴ Testimony of W. Lee Coulson Before the Federal Communications Commission, April 29, 1946, WHAS . . . Louisville, Kentucky, Clear Channel Hearing, Docket Number 6741, Federal Communications Commission, Washington D.C., F-5-F-8, Program Analysis taken from Week of November 12-18, 1944, 1-2.

again housed WHAS in a state-of-the-art facility, this time with preparations for a full immersion into television. The future seemed primed for more of the same success the station enjoyed in its first twenty-seven years.

The Slow Decline

Yet, while the station remained profitable it never again enjoyed the level of success that once made it a constant reoccurring presence within the national dialogue on radio. From the dawn of the 1950s onward, radio in Louisville and across the nation played an increasingly diminished role as television began to extend its long, dark shadow over its older technological cousin. This change does not imply that people stopped listening to WHAS or radio in general; as media historian Susan Douglas observed, quite the contrary occurred. The baby boomers turned to radio for escape and rebellion as the medium helped foster the widespread popularity of rock n' roll just as it had done for jazz in the decades previous. In Douglas's opinion, what television's proliferation helped create was an almost instant nostalgia for the old days of radio where listening "was like being a child again, and having stories read to you and being expected to have – and use – a vivid imagination." She argues that those who long to revisit radio's golden age really miss "their role in completing the picture, in giving individual meaning to something that went out to a mass audience."

They miss the mental activity, the engagement, the do-it-yourself nature of radio listening. They miss having such a free-ranging role in giving mass culture its private and public meanings. They miss the kinds of conversations radio provoked, in which friends or family or co-workers talked together to fill in the blanks. They miss radio's invisibility. When people sigh about radio, they are yearning for a mass medium that stimulated the imagination instead of stunting it.⁵

⁵ Susan Douglas, *Listening In: Radio and the American Imagination*, 4.

Although many longed for the radio that was, they showed no hesitation in embracing television. While just 108 television stations broadcast from 1948 to 1952 – resulting from a temporary freeze the FCC implemented to study potential interference problems which the onset of the Korean War stretched into a near four-year period – competing industries in close proximity to the stations felt their effects. Attendance at movie theaters, sporting events, and even restaurants dwindled in cities with one or more television stations. Some libraries reported a decrease in check-outs and book stores saw their sales decrease and of course, radio suffered. Not even its celebrities were safe. In 1949 Bob Hope enjoyed a 23.8 share in radio ratings; by 1953 that fell to 5.4. Networks reduced their budgets and comedians and entertainers, once backed by large expensive orchestras supported by corporate sponsors saw themselves hosting quiz shows or became disc jockeys. “In 1952 death seemed imminent for network radio,” wrote Erik Barnouw. “The FCC promised an early end to the television freeze. The big sponsors were ready for the switch. As Fred Allen put it, they were ready to abandon radio, like the bones at a barbecue.”⁶

In Louisville, proof that radio continued to play a major factor in the Bingham family enterprise existed as improvements in equipment and facilities continued. In February 1963, the station signed on as an affiliate of ABC after operating independently for almost four years. It severed its relationship with CBS due to a dispute over the networks “Program Consolidation Plan.”⁷ In 1964 Towner placed the Western Electric 407-A transmitter at Eastwood he had hoped to use in WHAS’s switch over to

⁶ Erik Barnouw, *The Golden Web*, 284-290.

⁷ “WHAS to Join ABC Radio,” *Broadcasting*, February 18, 1963, 120. The article labeled WHAS one of the country’s best known stations. In 1968 WHAS switched back to CBS after it dropped its controversial program policy.

superpower as back up to a new General Electric 50,000-watt high-level plate modulated transmitter. In 1965 Barry Bingham, Sr. approved the construction for a \$6.3 million facility several blocks from the newspapers offices on Chestnut Street between Sixth and Armory Place. The structure housed the television, AM, and FM radio stations, independent from the newspaper facilities for the first time in its history. Supervised by Bingham's son, Barry Bingham, Jr., Lisle Baker argued the building was "too big, unnecessarily sophisticated, and wildly expensive" in part because the television station ranked a second to WAVE in such a small regional market. An additional headache for Baker was the very unnecessary all-classical music station WHAS-FM, another of Bingham, Jr.'s projects, which lost in excess of \$100,000 a year during its brief run. The younger Bingham defied the results of an exploratory study guaranteeing the station's failure – the station's debut made it one of three all-classical music stations in the city – and pursued an expensive ad campaign for the new station's promotion. The dismal returns prompted a switch in 1968 to an all-news format and the call letters WNNS just after the new facilities opened but this effort fared little better. The FM station did not become profitable for the Bingham family until 1977 when WNNS became WAMZ and switched its formatting to country music.⁸

The Sale and an [Official] End to an Era

On January 9, 1986, printed on the front page of *The Louisville Times* and within the pages of notable national newspapers such as *The New York Times* the following morning, was a statement from a father and the resignation of a son. Citing in his usual manner, which always seemed to revolve around a concern for continual financial

⁸ Baysinger, 3; "WHAS-AM-TV to Get New Building," *Broadcasting*, July 26, 1965, 73; "WHAS-FM Makes Debut With Classical Music," *Broadcasting*, September 12, 1966, 58, 62; Tiff and Jones, *The Patriarch*, 261-263.

solvency, Barry Bingham, Sr. offered his media empire up for sale. “The future requirements for journalism, both print and electronic, are difficult to predict. Meanwhile, tax policies make it increasingly hard for family-held media corporations to maintain control from one generation to the other,” he wrote. His three surviving children had produced nine grandchildren and Bingham predicted that “divergent interests are bound to develop among so many individuals, as they have done in our children’s generation.” In fact, that statement revealed the true motivation behind the sale. Familial squabbling and cutthroat business decisions left the Bingham children at odds with each other in such a fashion that their father’s one democratic remedy to the situation was a sale. Having moved over from WHAS into his father’s place as publisher in 1971, Barry Bingham, Jr. viewed the decision as a “betrayal of the traditions and principles which I have sought to perpetuate.” His notice of resignation made no effort to hide his bitterness. “Had I thought,” he wrote “in the early 1960s, that my career would be abbreviated by my parents in this summary way, I would have dedicated my life’s work to other enterprises.”⁹

In May the newspapers sold to the Gannett publishing interests for \$305 million. WHAS-TV followed with the Providence Journal Company of Rhode Island purchasing the station for \$85.7 million. WHAS-AM and FM radio station WAMZ sold to Clear Channel Communications for \$20 million. In all, the sale of the family’s holdings netted \$448 million dollars and ignited a small national media firestorm over the dissolution of

⁹ “Bingham Sr. to Sell Communications Firm; Bingham Jr. Calls Father’s Act ‘Irrational,’” *The Louisville Times*, January 9, 1986, 1; “A Father’s Statement and His Son’s Response,” *The New York Times*, January 10, 1986, D3. Journalist Alex S. Jones won a Pulitzer Prize for his coverage of the Bingham family holdings saga. He and his wife, journalist Susan E. Tift turned a large part of his research into the book *The Patriarch: The Rise and Fall of the Bingham Dynasty*. Along with their work, other biographies cited throughout, including Marie Brenner’s *House of Dreams* and Sallie Bingham’s *Passion and Prejudice*, cover the dramatic turn of events that led to the dissolution of family control.

one the twentieth century's great media dynasties. Gannett ceased publication of *The Louisville Times* in 1987. The *Courier-Journal* remains, although like radio before it, print media's influence erodes in the face of the internet. WHAS radio continues operation under the auspices of Clear Channel Communications while the television studios remain occupied at Chestnut Street.¹⁰

Conclusion

It can be argued that some form of civic responsibility and dedication to public service never left WHAS, as the continued success of the television station's annual "Crusade for Children" telethon -- nearing its sixth decade -- demonstrates. The charitable pledge drive for special needs children provides a direct link to the type of high-minded, community oriented broadcasting implemented under Credo Harris, albeit in a televised form.¹¹ However, what this work has shown is that WHAS radio's arrival as a viable commercial business distorted the initial trajectories its forefathers intended for the medium effectively diluting its nobler aspects. A technological tool with the unprecedented power and influence -- to enlighten and enhance the daily lives of millions through education, the high art of classical music and opera, exposure to politics, and instant news updates, all filtered through a sense of duty to its community -- saw its grand ambitions watered down by the allure of increased profits sacrificing originality and imagination for accessible, light-entertainment programming generated from a handful of single sources.

¹⁰ Tift and Jones, 489.

¹¹ Begun in 1954 under the supervision of Victor Sholis, WHAS's Crusade for Children to date has raised more than \$143 million dollars and distributed these funds to various organizations serving special needs children throughout all of Kentucky's counties and 50 counties in the southern portion of Indiana. See John E. Kleber, ed., *The Encyclopedia of Louisville* (Lexington: The University Press of Kentucky, 2001), 233-234 and www.whascrusade.org/who-we-are/ for additional information.

This observation is not meant to diminish the efforts of WHAS or to say that it conceded the entirety of its programming schedule over to the whims of its networks. Coulson's FCC testimony proved this was not the case. If anything, it is meant to bring about reflection on the station's performance throughout radio's ascendance in power. In the 1920s, Harris and the many station managers like him failed to anticipate the unexpected costs required of running a radio station determined to maintain a quality level of programming service. By the next decade, the proliferation of the networks, their programs created and funded by advertisement agencies, afforded many stations a reprieve from their hemorrhaging operating costs but carried with them unintended consequences. Concessions made in the face of network programming schedules homogenized radio. Listeners could often hear the same programs at the same time at different points on their radio dials. As a result, certain aspects of local programming suffered, but none more so than in the field of education as WHAS's experiences with the University of Kentucky can attest.

Annual operating costs paled in comparison to the never-ending demand for technological and locational upgrades. As has been shown, better improvements in technology came with heftier price tags. Started as a venture with an initial investment in the thousands, WHAS operated at a deficit for over a decade, required a half a million dollar upgrade sixteen years later, and attributed to further investments ten times that much in later decades. To stay competitive and on the air, WHAS and stations like it had to accept that such expenditures were the rule rather than the exception to broadcasting. As the previous chapter showed, this daunting reality almost resulted in the sale of

WHAS as Barry Bingham, Sr. had tired of the repeated cash infusions his radio station required.

Yet, what remains evident is that financial security, afforded the station through the Bingham newspapers, allowed WHAS to explore all aspects of radio's original high-minded intentions. That despite a prolonged tenure of unprofitability, Harris and his staff was never pressured to conform to any other precedent than that which they set for themselves. Such independence allowed the station to pursue experiments as that of Fred Harlow's Mammoth Cave tests, the baseball radiogames at Parkway Field, and remote broadcasts from nearby theaters or Fort Knox. Its long relationship with the University of Kentucky – through the broadcasting of the university's programs and assistance with its Listening Centers – is both admirable and honorable despite its eventual demise. The station's decision to turn over in a moment's notice its microphone to citizens in need, whether in a desperate search or in need of rescue, endeared the station to its community in a way that set it apart from its broadcasting peers. Such actions display an attitude, approach, and relationship with communications media that in today's saturated form emerges in brief, fleeting moments. In essence, radio station WHAS fought to keep its gaze fixed on providing a public service to its listening community even while shifting with the tide into commercial broadcasting. That it accomplished as much as it did is commendable and deserving of a place within the historiography of radio broadcasting in the United States.

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