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A "Super-Powered" Goodwill Ambassador: Establishing WRUF at the University of Florida, 1925-1940

by E. L. "Ted" Burrows

In the 1920s, radio in the United States was in its infancy. Only two decades earlier, in December 1901, Guglielmo Marconi had successfully transmitted and received wireless signals across the Atlantic Ocean. Since then, equipment and techniques had been improved—mainly for military or maritime safety uses such as communication with ships at sea. Most early efforts involved wireless telegraphy, transmitting Morse Code by radio signals. Some experimenters, however, worked on wireless telephony and the transmission of the human voice.

At first there was little understanding of the new medium's potential for public service or commerce. By the early 1920s, however, several pioneering stations (notably WHA in Madison, Wisconsin, WWJ in Detroit, KDKA in Pittsburgh, and WEAJ in New York City) had begun what was called "broadcasting"—transmitting regularly scheduled programs of speech or music, which the public could hear at home on simple receivers. Radio broadcasting stations sprang up rapidly as sales of receivers increased. Stations varied greatly in signal strength and program quality. Station owners included manufacturers or sellers of radios and other electrical equipment, newspapers or other businesses, state or local governments, and educational institutions. By the end of 1922, federal authorities listed 570 stations operating in the United States and its

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overseas territories, and another 67 that had briefly operated but were discontinued.¹

Coincident with this rapid growth in the broadcasting industry and Florida's economic and land-sales boom of the 1920s, WRUF was established at the University of Florida. The station's promoters intended it to be Florida's "super-powered" goodwill ambassador.² Many business leaders believed that Florida should advertise its advantages to the rest of the nation in order to attract new residents and stimulate commerce. A January 1, 1925, Associated Press dispatch from Tallahassee explained why Agriculture Commissioner Nathan Mayo supported the advertising idea:

Too little is being done by the state of Florida—that is the state government itself—to spread before the people of the country the message telling of the advantages this state offers. . . . While the Legislature now provides a total of \$8,500 yearly which . . . may be considered for advertising purposes by the Department of Agriculture, many of the cities . . . are devoting larger sums . . . to encourage persons to settle, or at least sojourn within their borders during the winter. Commissioner of Agriculture Nathan Mayo expresses the opinion that the state should adopt a more progressive attitude. . . . He feels that a fund of not less than \$100,000 should be provided, to be administered by and used entirely for the state-at-large.³

Yet, Mayo did not mention the possible use of radio. Not until March 26, when the feasibility of a state publicity campaign was discussed during a business conference in West Palm Beach, did Governor John W. Martin offer high-level support for the concept.⁴ Soon afterwards, friend and supporters of the University of Florida approached the state legislature

1. "Who Will Ultimately Do The Broadcasting?," *Radio Broadcast*, April 1923, quoted in Lawrence W. Lichty and Malachi C. Topping, *American Broadcasting: A Source Book on the History of Radio and Television* (New York, 1975), 125.
2. Gainesville *Daily Sun*, 11 October 1927. This was one of many published references to the station as "super-powered." Although WRUF's transmitting power never exceeded five thousand watts, that was considered a strong station by standards of the time.
3. *Ibid.*, 2 January 1925.
4. *Ibid.*, 26 March 1925.

for an appropriation sufficient to install an up-to-date radio broadcasting station at the University of Florida. . . . There has been expressed an undercurrent of fear whereby Gainesville might receive some publicity from the broadcasting station at the expense of the taxpayers of the state. Of course the view is taken only by the most narrow-minded and should not be considered with any degree of seriousness as a barrier to the station at the university.⁵

By late May, a bill proposing a university radio station moved through the legislature and was signed by Governor Martin on June 8. Appropriating \$50,000 for the work of "establishing . . . a super-power radio broadcasting station . . . [which] shall be of five kilowatt power maximum," the new law specified building the station on the campus at Gainesville, with links to the state Capitol and the Florida State College for Women (now Florida State University) in Tallahassee. Additionally, the enterprise would promote the interests of the state agriculture commissioner by broadcasting information on weather and crop market conditions. Subject to federal approval, the new station's call letters were WFLA, an acronym for "Watch Florida Lead All."⁶

Within two years, however, state officials realized that the original \$50,000 was not enough to establish WFLA, so the legislature appropriated an additional \$50,000 to the project.⁷ In the meantime, some Gainesville businessmen feared that if the state applied in normal fashion to the Federal Radio Commission (forerunner to the Federal Communications Commission) for a transmitting frequency, WFLA might be placed at the end of a list already more than five hundred names long. Hoping to avoid a long wait, the citizens' committee acquired a frequency by buying the transmitter of an established St. Petersburg radio station, WHBN, owned by the First Avenue Methodist Church. The Board of Control (predecessor to the Board of Regents), designated as overseer of the planned station, accepted these new call letters, and enthusiasm for the project grew. On October 11, 1927, the Gainesville *Daily Sun* reported the official

5. *Ibid.*, 28 April 1925.

6. *Laws of Florida: General Laws* (1927) 1: 456-457, quoted in Donald W. Poucher, "The Voice of Florida," 1964, unpublished manuscript.

7. *Laws of Florida: General Laws* (1927) 1: 1065-1066, quoted in "Radio Station WRUF, Part 1," circa 1950, unpublished manuscript, WRUF station files, Gainesville, Fla.

formation of the Florida State Radio Citizens' Committee, which moved WHBN's transmitter to Gainesville, urged state officials to get the station on the air quickly and initiated a new set of call letters—KVOF, meaning "Voice of Florida."⁸ It is uncertain who proposed KVOF or what caused the change from WFLA, but references to KVOF persisted in news reports for the next year.

Other parts of Florida were paying attention. "This [radio station] is a very desirable adjunct to the other public efforts that are being made to put Florida favorably before the people of the whole country," the *Leesburg Commercial* editorialized, "and we hope there will be nothing in the way of the state Board of Control acting favorably and quickly upon it."⁹ While some supported the project, however, other Floridians saw opportunity to boost their own city's fortunes. Businessmen in Sarasota also recognized radio's promotional potential, bought the transmitting equipment of station WJBB, and moved it from its original site in Tampa. Coupled with the state's lethargy in getting the university station ready, this hint of sectional competition elicited comment from the *Clearwater Sun*:

No doubt this will bring a cry of anguish and further pleadings from Gainesville, Tallahassee and Jacksonville who are still trying to evolve some means of . . . installing KVOF. . . . It is safe to say that there are others in the state just as interested in seeing the station erected . . . but someone or something seems to have slipped.¹⁰

More than two years elapsed between enactment of the radio station legislation and a Board of Control meeting on October 17, 1927, when optimistic supporters of the planned radio station believed that the board would vote to begin broadcasting by the following January. On the day of the board's meeting, the *Daily Sun* enthusiastically proclaimed that "all Florida will have a great and powerful voice . . . to tell its story and to broadcast its joy. Is it any wonder that the action of the Board of Control is breathlessly awaited?"¹¹

But again that action was postponed. The board directed the attorney general to determine whether the law actually required

8. *Daily Sun*, 13 September 1927.

9. *Leesburg Commercial*, quoted in the *Daily Sun*, 12 October 1927.

10. *Clearwater Sun*, quoted in the *Daily Sun*, 13 October 1927.

11. *Daily Sun*, 17 October 1927.

the board to establish a station or merely permitted it to do so if it saw fit. Governor Martin apparently had little tolerance for such stonewalling. In late October, he personally arranged to make construction funds available and challenged "the Board of Control to establish it."¹² To make the record clear, the attorney general issued an opinion that the legislature's appropriation measure was binding upon the Board of Control. On November 14, the board voted to proceed immediately with construction.¹³

University officials petitioned the Federal Radio Commission for assignment of an operating frequency, transmitting power (the station would be granted the hoped-for five thousand watts), and call letters. Yet, the commission refused the three most frequently discussed call letter possibilities—WFLA, KVOF, and WHBN. Meanwhile, construction proceeded on the radio station building and its two two-hundred-foot steel transmitting towers, all on the university campus. On-the-air transmitter tests began August 8, 1928, and soon thereafter "the station, which has had many names since its inception . . . has finally been given a permanent name by the Federal Radio Commission. In future the station will be known as WRUF."¹⁴ By common understanding, the letters meant "Radio at the University of Florida."

The new radio station was dedicated on Saturday, October 13. At 8:30 p.m., organist Claude Murphree sounded the first notes of "The Orange and Blue" on the pipes of the Anderson Memorial Organ in University Auditorium, linked by microphone and cable to the WRUF studio. An account of the dedication from the WRUF files noted:

The important guests on the inaugural broadcast included university President John J. Tigert; U.S. Sen. Duncan U. Fletcher; Doyle E. Carlton, Democratic nominee for governor of Florida; Fred Davis, attorney general of Florida; Congressman Lex Green; and P. K. Yonge, chairman of the Board of Control. The program also featured the University String Quartet, under the direction of R. DeWitt Brown. Selections included "Til the Sands of the Desert

12. *Ibid.*, 26 October 1927.

13. *Tampa Tribune*, quoted in the *Daily Sun*, 17 November 1927.

14. *Daily Sun*, 9 August 1928.

Grow Cold," "Home, Sweet Home," and "We Are The Boys of Old Florida."¹⁵

At the time of WRUF's dedication, many of its advocates believed that the station would serve the entire state. "Few events have been more significant . . . than the formal opening of WRUF. . . . The authorities had in mind . . . that they will impress the people of this state, and make folks realize that here is the state owned station for the benefit of all Florida, and not just any one particular section," explained the *Daily Sun*; "WRUF can do much to eliminate sectionalism in this state and to knit it into a composite whole."¹⁶

Administration of WRUF became the responsibility of the university's General Extension Division, headed by Major Bert C. Riley. Operating the station under Riley's supervision was Bobby Griffin, referred to in various documents as the program director or chief announcer. Perhaps because the General Extension Division was oriented more toward correspondence courses and programs for schoolteachers than entertainment, WRUF's first year on the air was devoted mainly to educational and cultural programs, including lectures and discussions. "This was found to be very impractical as only a limited number of people listened to these broadcasts," one station memo explained; "The listening audience of the station was thus a 'class' audience and the broadcasts were unsatisfactory to the public generally, and to the university officials, particularly."¹⁷ There were some entertainment programs, usually featuring local talent. Organist Claude Murphree and pianist Ruth Dobbins appeared frequently, listed on the payroll as staff musicians. But most of the station's airtime remained dedicated to educational programs with small audiences.

A shortage of operating money, however, hindered program development. Though the legislature had appropriated funds to build WRUF, it had not provided for continuing operations. This seemed to contradict the station's intended purpose—to promote Florida to the rest of the nation. To fulfill that mission required steady financial support that so far was lacking. In December 1928, the *Daily Sun* noted how "those in charge have been hard put to book features which could attract and hold the attention of listen-

15. "Account of WRUF Dedication Ceremony," WRUF station files.

16. *Daily Sun*, 13 October 1928.

17. "Radio Station WRUF, Part I."

ers in this commonwealth and throughout the nation. . . . The artists who have so generously given of their talents are to be commended; were it not for the 'faithful few' Florida's broadcast-station would find itself without any programs."¹⁸

The "faithful few" were not always live performers. Ralph Nimmons, who joined the WRUF staff in mid-1929, recalled that "Every day, somebody would make a trip to the Gainesville Furniture Company, which was then run by Gus Cox. . . . We'd go down and get a stack of records, and of course we'd give him credit for [lending] them. If in the course of the day we'd run out of records, we'd just turn the stack over and play them again."¹⁹ Because the furniture company's generosity was acknowledged on the air in return for the loan of the recordings, the arrangement marked a significant step by WRUF—its first transaction approximating commercial advertising.²⁰ In September 1928, before the station's dedication, Florida Attorney General Fred H. Davis had stated that the new station, in keeping with the "usual customs and practices incident to the operation of radio stations generally," would be allowed to carry commercial advertising and use the revenues to defray operating expenses.²¹ Now the station discovered it needed advertising just to survive.

Producing programs on a shoestring budget, WRUF slowly built up its roster of local performers. Among them was a comedian named E. Z. Jones who billed himself as "Dixie's Disciple of Fun and Frolic" and made regular appearances during the station's first three years. Another artist was violinist and WRUF receptionist Pauline Mizell, whose radio concert was interrupted one night when her violin strings suddenly came unfastened, and she was unable to continue until a quick repair was made.²²

Agricultural programs were prominent on WRUF in its early years. By November 1928, reports of station programming indicated that "practical farm and home talks by specialists of the College of Agriculture [are being given] Monday, Wednesday and Friday."²³ The agricultural report became an increasingly impor-

18. *Daily Sun*, 19 December 1928.

19. Ralph Nimmons, interview with author, Jacksonville, Fla., 9 August 1974.

20. Kenneth F. Small, "Summary History of WRUF (and WRUF-FM)," 1970, WRUF station files. Small was station manager in the early 1970s.

21. *Daily Sun*, 12 September 1928.

22. Nimmons interview.

23. *Daily Sun*, 23 November 1928.



J. Francis Cooper, agriculture professor and longtime host of WRUF's "Florida Farm Hour" program. *Courtesy of the University of Florida College of Journalism and Communications, Gainesville.*

tant part of WRUF fare during the next three decades, especially after the start of the "Florida Farm Hour" broadcasts each weekday at noon. Featuring agricultural extension editor J. Francis Cooper, the program began during the station's first year on the air.

Sports programs, for which WRUF would become well known, began early as well. One week after the station's dedication, WRUF presented its first play-by-play account of a sports event. In 1928's "homecoming" football game, the University of Florida played Mercer College on Fleming Field, just north of the present Ben Hill Griffin Stadium at Florida Field. The Gators won 73-0 in the first game ever broadcast on WRUF.²⁴

Though the radio station had a new building, its furnishings and equipment remained primitive. The studios and five-thousand-watt transmitter were located in a brick structure (now the university police station) about fifteen hundred feet south of the University Auditorium and other main campus buildings. The station site was mostly pasture used by animals of the university's agricultural experiment station. A sandy trail (now Museum Road) led west from South 13th Street through the pasture to the station.

Inside, three rooms on the ground floor served as studios, though it is unlikely that all were used regularly for that purpose. The largest of the three measured twenty-by-thirty feet, sufficient to accommodate musical groups for live shows. From a small room with a record turntable, WRUF's tiny collection of recorded music was played. Interior windows provided views from one studio into another. Also on the ground floor were an office and a reception area.²⁵

Putting programs on the air using the equipment of that era required production techniques that seem unusual by modern standards. Ralph Nimmons recalled some of the studio conditions during WRUF's first year:

The microphone was one of the old type carbon microphones . . . and . . . we had one of those laboratory pedestals that had a little shelf that was adjustable with a set screw. We put the microphone on that thing. What you'd do before you turned them on—you'd turn the things upside down and beat them to distribute the carbon [gran-

24. Jim Camp, untitled manuscript, 29 September 1968, WRUF station files. Camp was a "continuity" writer, someone who prepared scripts for programs and commercial announcements. This apparently was a rough draft of a presentation marking WRUF's fortieth anniversary.

25. "Description of Technical Equipment," WRUF station files. The original typed entries had been revised by hand and dated May 10, 1935, apparently by one of the station's engineering staff.



Interior of WRUF's largest studio room, suitable for broadcasting live musical programs. *Courtesy of the University of Florida College of Journalism and Communications, Gainesville.*

ules] in the microphone, otherwise they would sound like a pan of fish frying. Many a time, Banks Duncan [a transmitter operator] would . . . make signals so we'd cut the mike off and I'd turn the thing upside down and beat the hell out of it and then turn the thing on and it'd be okay. . . . We didn't even have carpet on the floors, and we had wicker chairs that used to just squeak like everything whenever anyone would sit in them.²⁶

The Federal Radio Commission at first assigned WRUF a transmitting frequency of 1480 kilocycles, sharing broadcast time with a distant station; when one was on the air, the other had to sign off.²⁷ Thus, the station operated sporadically during its first year—on the air for an hour, then off for an hour or two, then back on for several hours. But after one month, the commission changed WRUF's frequency to 1470 kc and allowed it to broadcast for an unlimited

26. Nimmons interview.

27. Bobby Griffin, memorandum to J. H. Fessenden, 27 September 1928, WRUF station files.

time each day, though the station did not immediately do so, probably because operating funds were low.²⁸

Program schedules were equally irregular. Regarding the "Florida Farm Hour," Ralph Nimmons recalled, "The clock didn't mean anything in those days, really. If it was five minutes before twelve and Mr. [J. Francis] Cooper came in and a record stopped—why, we'd start Mr. Cooper. He'd run until he ran out of material, then we'd go back to records."²⁹

Evening entertainment also was unpredictable. "Every now and then on a Sunday night, the Canova family [a musical group], would come in from Starke [a nearby town], which included Judy Canova and her brother Zeke—who later became quite famous—and they would go for two or three hours, as long as they could last, and we'd keep them on as long as they could last. There was no publicity or anything because we never knew when they were coming," Nimmons remembered. The Canovas later became prominent performers on the "Grand Ol' Opry" in Nashville.³⁰

Before the end of its first year on the air, WRUF found itself without experienced leadership. Chief Announcer/Program Director Bobby Griffin resigned, apparently for health reasons, and university employee Bill Mitchell temporarily took control. University President John J. Tigert wanted a permanent supervisor for WRUF and contacted a friend in Washington, D.C.—Major Garland W. Powell, "a man of approximately nine years of radio experience." Tigert offered Powell the position of chief announcer "in order to study and survey the whole situation," and Powell took his position on September 12, 1929.³¹

Powell, who would guide WRUF for more than twenty-seven years and through many crucial stages of its development, was born in 1892. He was a graduate of the University of Maryland and had studied at Johns Hopkins University and the Massachusetts Institute of Technology.³² It was at M.I.T. that he received his introduction to radio broadcasting, or "wireless" as it then was known. By the time the United States entered World War I in 1917, Powell had begun a career in law, but he left his practice, took aviation train-

28. "Radio Station WRUF, Part I."

29. Nimmons interview

30. *Ibid.*

31. "Radio Station WRUF, Part I."

32. "Garland Powell, Mr. WRUF, Dies Following Illness," *Gainesville Sun*, 30 August 1959.

ing, and commanded the 22nd U.S. Aerial Squadron in France. In 1921 and 1922, he served in the Maryland Legislature and became active in programs assisting military veterans. In the mid-1920s, Powell spent four years in Washington, D.C., organizing radio programs for the American Legion. While there, he met Tigert who then was U.S. Commissioner of Education. As Powell's widow, Consuela Dolbeare, later recalled, the two men "became friends, very close friends all through their lives."³³

In February 1930, Powell became director of WRUF, a title previously unused.³⁴ At the same time, Ralph Nimmons became chief announcer (Bobby Griffin's old job), thereby transferring out of the General Extension Division and joining the full-time WRUF staff at a salary of \$150 per month. But just as the station appeared more organized and situated for growth, the long-held dream of national prominence for WRUF began to fade. WRUF had changed its transmitting frequency from 1480 to 1470 kilocycles, and complaints were beginning to arise. Bell Telephone Laboratories engineer J. D. Herber came to Gainesville as a consultant, signing an affidavit stating that the WRUF transmitter was functioning properly. The university's student newspaper, *The Florida Alligator*, claimed that Herber's statement gave "additional support . . . in the station's plea for a new wave channel." The paper further reported that "Professor Bennett, electrical engineer of the station, considers the result of these tests as concrete proof that the difficulties of transmission are due to the inferior wave length assigned to it, rather than to any fault of the apparatus in operation."³⁵ Glowing expectations of a "super-powered" national publicity voice had been expressed mainly by influential Florida business people and political figures who had little practical knowledge of radio. Eventually, technical limitations put the grand publicity dream to rest and forced the station to concentrate on serving a more localized audience than originally intended.

In response, early in November 1929, the Federal Radio Commission authorized a change in WRUF's transmitting frequency from 1470 kc to 830 kc. Hoping to protect 830 kc-frequency station KOA in Denver, Colorado, from interference, the commission placed further time restrictions on WRUF's broadcast day. Such in-

33. Consuela Dolbeare, interview with author, Gainesville, Fla., 25 July 1974.

34. "Radio Station WRUF, Part I."

35. Gainesville *Florida Alligator*, 6 October 1929.



Major Garland Powell, director of WRUF from 1929 to 1956. *Courtesy of the University of Florida College of Journalism and Communications, Gainesville.*

terference was more likely to occur at night because radio signals often travel much farther at night, so WRUF was required to sign off each day at a time corresponding to sunset in Denver. Accounting for time zone differences, the ruling meant that WRUF could remain on the air at least through early evening in Florida. In summers, Denver's sunset would have been late enough to allow

WRUF's listeners a longer evening of programs from WRUF; but in the late autumn and throughout winter, Denver's sunset occurred about 8 p.m. on Gainesville's clock.

The frequency shift was hailed as an improvement to WRUF's operations. "The favorable part of this exchange is that it allows WRUF to reach the entire state of Florida," noted the *Alligator*; "Under former circumstances only the local cities and those of the north could be broadcasted to."³⁶ That was because, with a given amount of transmission power, a radio signal generally will travel farther on a lower frequency than on a higher one. That seems to have been the main reason for optimism following the radio commission's decision.

The reference to broadcasting to "the local cities and those of the north," with the apparent exclusion of cities in between, deserves some explanation. E. A. "Ed" Slimak, who was WRUF's chief engineer during the 1970s, explained that even on higher frequencies in the AM spectrum, signals sometimes would be received at distant points, even thousands of miles away, though not with dependable regularity. Signals reaching the atmospheric layer known as the ionosphere sometimes are reflected back to earth, resulting in a "skip" that can carry a station's signal even across oceans.³⁷ Thus, even before the station's change to 830 kc, it was possible for WRUF to be heard not only in the Gainesville area but also in parts of northern and midwestern states, even though it failed to reach many parts of Florida.

Another technical factor hindered WRUF, though it was not fully understood when the station was built. Broadcasting engineers learned in the early 1930s that the ability of the ground to absorb radio signals affected a station's range. The Federal Communications Commission (successor to the Federal Radio Commission in 1934) measured soil conductivity levels across the United States, grading them on a scale of one to thirty. The lower the number, the more the soil absorbs a signal as it radiates away from the station. Slimak understood that soil conductivity conditions in the sandy portions of northern and central Florida ranked between two and four on the scale, placing these areas among the least favorable in the country for radio signals.³⁸

36. *Ibid.*, 10 November 1929.

37. E.A. "Ed" Slimak, interview with author, Gainesville, Fla., 21 October 1974.

38. *Ibid.*

The change to the lower frequency of 830 kc did enable WRUF to send a stronger signal to northern and central Florida with its allotted five thousand watts of power.³⁹ However, the restriction in broadcasting hours plus the poor soil conductivity did away with the station's ability to broadcast dependably to northern and mid-western states. And so the dream of a powerful publicity "Voice of Florida" faded away.

Possibly realizing the limitations on the "Voice of Florida," Powell implemented programs to enhance the station's relationship with the university. In 1930, he began to employ University of Florida students as part-time salaried staff. Although station records are not precise on this point, there is general agreement that the first paid student announcer was Walter L. "Red" Barber, who later became nationally renowned as a sports announcer. Barber joined the WRUF payroll on March 4, 1930.⁴⁰ Chief announcer Ralph Nimmons also remembered a young man named James Leonard Butsch, who used the name "James Leonard" on the air and was used both as an announcer and a singer: "I think Red came before Jimmy, and they both came about the same time."⁴¹

The idea of using student helpers at WRUF was not really new in 1930. One early justification for placing WRUF on the university campus was that electrical engineering students could gain practical training there. Still, if such training was ever given, there is no indication that any engineering students were on the payroll. There is no mention of students employed as on-air program talent prior to 1930.

Also beginning in 1930, Powell tried a variety of new programs. In January, WRUF offered "The Adventures of Bud and Easy," a variety show featuring comedian E. Z. Jones and Claude Lee, who managed the Florida Theater in downtown Gainesville. "Hour with the Masters" in the afternoons and "Variety Musical Parade" in the mornings used music played on 78-rpm discs. A small orchestra known as the Suwannee Serenaders provided live music, and an-

39. In 1937, WRUF would change its frequency again. A treaty between the United States and Cuba required both WRUF and Denver's KOA to change their frequencies, apparently to avoid interference with Cuban stations on the same wavelength. WRUF changed its frequency to an 850 kc station, where it remains today.

40. Walter L. "Red" Barber and Robert Creamer, *Rhubarb in the Catbird Seat* (Garden City, N.Y., 1968), 145.

41. Nimmons interview.

other popular group was the Orange Grove String Band. "The Florida Farm Hour" remained a fixture on the WRUF daily schedule, with talks by extension service editor J. Francis Cooper, his assistant Ralph Fulghum, and other members of the agriculture faculty. When the authors of faculty papers could not visit the WRUF studio to read their own work, Cooper or Fulghum did it or found an extra voice to add variety to the program. It was just such an effort to find an extra voice that led to the recruitment of Red Barber.

Barber returned early from the 1929 Christmas holidays to finish a research paper. A student of modest means, he worked as a janitor at the University Club, a rooming house occupied mainly by male faculty members, among whom was Ralph Fulghum. One day near the end of December, Fulghum asked Barber to substitute for a radio lecturer who had gone out of town.

Barber later wrote that Fulghum had three ten-minute lectures scheduled for that day's farm broadcast and pleaded, "Red, please. Come on. It would be a big help to me, having a change of voice. If I sit there and read all three papers, one after another, it'll be terrible." Reluctantly, Barber agreed to read one lecture. In return, Fulghum promised to treat Barber to dinner. And so, Barber's first stint on WRUF was a reading of "a heavily documented, detailed treatise on 'Certain Aspects of Bovine Obstetrics.'"⁴²

After Barber's reading, which he broadcast without rehearsal, Powell offered him a part-time position. The student, who was balancing several other jobs, politely declined. It took Powell more than two months, using Fulghum as an intermediary, to overcome Barber's reluctance. On March 4, 1930, after Powell offered him \$50 per month, Barber gave up his other local jobs as waiter and janitor and joined WRUF's announcing staff.

Although Barber was hired for a salary, not all student announcers were so fortunate. As Nimmons remembered, "Of course, we'd audition anyone that came along, that wanted any sort of a job. We used a lot of students on a part-time basis . . . and a lot of them were unpaid because we didn't have the money. They were just doing it to see whether they liked it. It was a laboratory . . . for radio technique, announcing, singers and what-have-you."⁴³

In WRUF's early years, not much emphasis was placed on news coverage so an arrangement was made with the *Daily Sun* to allow

42. Barber and Creamer, *Rhubarb in the Catbird Seat*, 143.

43. Nimmons interview.

the station to use the newspaper's material. At least during the 1930s, WRUF personnel were not news reporters. Instead, news items reported on the air were read verbatim from the *Daily Sun* and other sources. Both Red Barber and Albert Hendrix, who joined WRUF in 1933, acknowledged that a favorite source of on-the-air news was the Jacksonville *Florida Times-Union*.⁴⁴

Even after WRUF installed its own national and world news teletype machine sometime in the late 1930s, newspapers still supplied material. Twice each day, Albert Hendrix, the station's custodian and messenger, made a trip downtown to the *Daily Sun*'s offices for the latest bulletins. "I rode a bicycle down there and I never will forget . . . [once] I came back on the bicycle just as fast as I could ride it and the bicycle came apart — just broke. I just left the bicycle," he recalled; "The announcer was standing in the door waiting . . . and I just left the bicycle and went running with the news . . . and met him at the door and he took it and went upstairs with it." A newscast was scheduled around noon each weekday, and nothing was to interfere with Hendrix's regular pickup of reports from the *Sun*. "I had to do that through the rain and cold and wind and everything—you name it," he remembered. When another newscast eventually was added in the late afternoon, Hendrix continued his trips. J. Sam Fouts, who also worked at WRUF in the 1930s, remembered Hendrix and his daily news runs: "Then he would roar back on his bicycle and come up the lane, and we'd see him coming up there about ten minutes 'til five, and we had a big news program at five o'clock to five-fifteen. [Hendrix] would have in his basket all the latest goodies and we'd lean . . . out the window and spur him on so he'd get up there in time for the hot news."⁴⁵

WRUF also expanded its sports programs. The play-by-play account of the Florida-Mercer football game in 1928, only a week after the station's dedication, was just the first of many. Other university sporting broadcast events were basketball and baseball games, track meets, and boxing matches. The state high school basketball tournament, held on the University of Florida campus, became an annual program. As Red Barber later wrote:

They played basketball all day long and into the night for three consecutive days. Because the tournament was state-

44. Albert Hendrix, interview with author, Gainesville, Fla., 21 October 1974.

45. *Ibid.*; J. Sam Fouts, notes, September 1974, in possession of author.

wide and because the radio station was supported by state funds, the regular broadcasting schedule was thrown out and every last one of those high school basketball games was broadcast in full. . . . Games were played consecutively; as soon as one was finished the next one would start. . . . One announcer handled the microphone all the way through. Jack Thompson did it the first year I was there, but I did it all myself in 1931, 1932 and 1933. It was the most grueling broadcast job I ever had. . . . You had no assistant, nobody to spell you, nobody to give the listeners a change of pace. . . . It gave me a complete distaste for basketball; I have never liked the game since.⁴⁶

Those marathon basketball broadcasts continued on WRUF at least through 1939.

Over the years, football became the most prominent of WRUF's sports broadcasts. When the 1930 season began, several announcers including Jack Thompson, Ralph Nimmons, Red Barber, and James Leonard Butsch alternated doing the play-by-play accounts while Powell tried to decide who did the best job. Eventually it became clear that Barber was the most proficient, mainly because he spent hours preparing with the Florida Gators coaching staff.

Broadcasting the games was a daunting challenge. Seating at Fleming Field was on bare wooden bleachers and, as Nimmons remembered, the announcer and his assistant set up their equipment "anyplace we could find—they didn't have press boxes—out in the sun."⁴⁷ Even when a crude press box was erected at Fleming Field, conditions remained difficult.⁴⁸

By mid-season in 1930, Florida Field was dedicated and became the regular venue for football. The new stadium had a somewhat better press box, although the crowd's roar continued to aggravate announcers and muffle broadcasts. To compensate for crowd noise, as Barber recalled, "the announcer would be closer to the microphone. The engineer would be listening with his earphones and would motion me to move closer. And then if you had

46. Barber and Creamer, *Rhubarb in the Catbird Seat*, 150.

47. Nimmons interview.

48. Walter L. "Red" Barber, interview with author, Tallahassee, Fla., 17 October 1974.



Walter L. "Red" Barber in the WRUF studio in 1934. After graduation that year, Barber took a broadcasting job with the Cincinnati Reds. He later earned nationwide fame announcing for the Brooklyn Dodgers and New York Yankees. *Courtesy of the University of Florida College of Journalism and Communications, Gainesville.*

a big roar from the crowd—you learned early—you'd just have to stop talking.⁴⁹ Barber carried his own materials to help him during games, including charts of his own design that enabled him to identify players at a glance.

Another sports announcer was Otis Boggs, who joined the staff in 1939 and for many years did play-by-play announcing for WRUF and its statewide football and basketball networks. The expansion of sports programming strained the station's budget, and new ways

49. *Ibid.*

were found to broadcast sporting events. "Sometimes in those days another thing that they did a lot," recalled Boggs, "they used Western Union 're-creations.' Rather than send a crew out . . . they'd get Western Union to supply an operator [to telegraph play-by-play information] . . . and they'd re-create the game with sound [effects created in the studio]. You'd never know if the guy was sending you the right information—he'd leave out things and you'd have to fill in ad-lib, so it was a wild deal doing those."⁵⁰ After an especially good broadcast of an exciting game, as many as 150 letters and telegrams might come in from listeners.

WRUF's service as the only regular radio source of University of Florida football games drew attention from state officials in Tallahassee, many of whom were university alumni. In the mid-1930s the legislature made further appropriations of state money contingent on WRUF's continued broadcasts of Gators football.⁵¹

But the economic difficulties of the Depression era left a chronic shortage of funds, making progress difficult at WRUF. "The financial plight of the station was desperate," Red Barber remembered; there was an employee pay cut

while I was there—in fact in 1931. The reason I can date it is because Ralph Nimmons left early in 1931 and I got his job [as chief announcer] and I was supposed to get \$150 per month. I'd planned to get married on that, on the 28th of March. And before I could get my first check and get married, there was a 10 percent cut, which meant that I got \$135 . . . and that was not restored during the time that I was there, and I left in March of 1934. At one time during that period, the state was unable to pay on schedule its salaries at the university and they used scrip for a short time.⁵²

Albert Hendrix also remembered the financial crunch, particularly those times when "the state just couldn't pay off because they didn't have the money and it lasted a good long time before we got paid. And we didn't get paid all at once anyway. . . . During the time when we didn't get paid, they [the university's agricultural experiment station] gave us milk, . . . they gave us bunches of greens, they

50. Otis Boggs, interview with author, Gainesville, Fla., 8 October 1974.

51. Small, "Summary History of WRUF (and WRUF-FM)."

52. Barber interview.

gave us sweet potatoes. They just helped; you could go down there and pick it up."⁵³

By 1933, some state officials proposed selling WRUF to private interests, since the benefits derived from the station did not seem to outweigh the costs of operation. Even many newspapers that earlier had supported WRUF turned their backs on it. In March, the Associated Dailies of Florida unanimously opposed "any sale or leasing of the state-owned radio station WRUF to any commercial interests," recommending instead "the abolition of said station inasmuch as it does not have the power to advertise Florida nationally and is not needed by the agricultural department of the University of Florida, whose needs can be served gratis by other radio stations in the state."⁵⁴ The association gave no reason as to why it would rather have the station simply shut down when a sale or lease to private operators could have generated revenue for the state.

Still, not everyone turned against WRUF. The Florida Engineering Society favored keeping the station on the air and, in April, urged "the extension of time on the air for radio station WRUF and . . . that radio research by the engineering experiment station be further encouraged."⁵⁵

Early in May, the legislature pondered what to do. A senate committee declared that "failure to continue this station as a state activity . . . would be equivalent to junking equipment valued at a total of \$109,521.70."⁵⁶ The two houses eventually agreed on a bill to appropriate \$25,000 to WRUF, again on the condition that it broadcast all University of Florida football games. Yet, the measure also left open the possibility of leasing the station to private interests.

The decision prodded Garland Powell to seek out advertisers whose support could make WRUF self-sufficient, thereby avoiding being leased out. Powell arranged for the CBS Radio Network to feed an hour of programming in the late afternoons, agreeing that in return WRUF would broadcast the Chesterfield Cigarette Company's popular 15-minute program.

By 1937, with state revenues low, the legislature again debated whether to continue funding WRUF. State Senator Spessard Hol-

53. Hendrix interview.

54. *Daily Sun*, 26 March 1933.

55. *Ibid.*, 16 April 1933.

56. *Ibid.*, 12 May 1933.

land (a University of Florida alumnus and future U.S. senator) vigorously opposed allocating more money. He "demanded that the university radio station become self-supporting and that no money be appropriated to operate it. After considerable debate the Legislature appropriated funds, with the provision that the station earn more through advertising to help sustain itself." But Powell found it difficult to attract advertisers. The station's mostly rural service resulted in a relatively small listening audience. Consequently, CBS dropped its programs from WRUF. Though the legislature narrowly approved an appropriation, Governor Fred P. Cone vetoed it, and the Board of Control held several meetings to discuss WRUF's future. Powell and the station's attorney in Washington, D.C., eventually convinced the board that the Federal Communications Commission would be unlikely to approve a lease arrangement in which the state retained ownership of WRUF while allowing private interests to run it. Having few options, the Board of Control decided to promote commercial competition on the public station and "instructed the director to go all out and accept all manner of advertising except whiskey, beer and wines."⁵⁷ Additionally, in order to attract more listeners and advertisers, the station scheduled more entertainment programming, though it continued to carry news and other informative programs.

Having begun the decade as a public-supported station, by 1940, WRUF was a fully commercial enterprise. It evolved in other important ways as well—abandoning its original state publicity mission, hiring students as paid announcers, and shifting from mostly educational programs to a mainly entertainment format. These changes set the precedent for WRUF's operations in later years. Today, it remains a commercial operation, providing entertainment and news to listeners in Gainesville and the surrounding area. WRUF now is operated by the University of Florida College of Journalism and Communications, with studios in Weimer Hall. It still employs and trains students pursuing telecommunication careers. But it was during WRUF's early years, in particular the decade of the 1930s, that WRUF's essential style and character were determined.

57. "Radio Station WRUF, Part I."