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The Birth of Twin Cities'

COMMERCIAL RADIO

TED CURTIS SMYTHE

RADIO, which had been a plaything of engineers and audio fans prior to World War I, surged across the country in 1921 and 1922. Apparently the successful broadcasting of the results of the Harding-Cox election on November 2, 1920, by 8MK in Detroit, Michigan, and KDKA in Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania, galvanized national interest in the new medium. This interest was reflected in the great increase of both receivers and broadcasting stations in the next two years.¹

While the Department of Commerce issued only five "broadcasting" licenses in the first eleven months of 1921, it gave out twenty-three licenses that December. And that was but the beginning. In the first seven months of 1922, 430 additional licenses were granted, bursting the figurative

seams of the ether. All of the new stations broadcast over the same wave length—360 meters (833.3 kilocycles) on the radio dial.²

Minnesota caught the radio fever in the spring of 1922. The infection began, apparently, during the winter when the University of Minnesota was granted a federal license to operate a broadcasting transmitter on the 360-meter band with 100 watts power. It was the first nonexperimental station in the Twin Cities. The government issued call letters WLB to the station in January, enabling it to continue its earlier experimental broadcasts of such daily fare as market and weather reports and such weekly items as concerts.³

Soon WLB was joined by the Findley Electric Company station, WCE, which first broadcast from the Curtis Hotel in Minneapolis on April 14. In rapid-fire order, three Twin Cities newspapers, the *Minneapolis Journal*, *Minneapolis Morning Tribune*, and *St. Paul Pioneer Press*, extended their competition to the air waves with stations WBAD, WAAL, and WAAH, respectively. Soon two other stations—

¹ Erik Barnouw, *A Tower In Babel: A History of Broadcasting in the United States*, 1: 4, 70, 91 (New York, 1966).

² Barnouw, *A Tower In Babel*, 91.

³ S. E. Frost, Jr., *Education's Own Stations: The History of Broadcast Licenses Issued to Educational Institutions*, 215 (Chicago, 1937); William Peck Banning, *Commercial Broadcasting Pioneer*, 135 (Cambridge, 1946).



Herschel V. Jones

WBAH of the Dayton Company on May 10 and WCAL of St. Olaf College in Northfield on May 13—began to clutter the air waves. Thus, before summer was officially upon the land, seven radio stations were broadcasting in Minnesota. Later that spring the St. Cloud Times Publishing Company opened station WFAM.⁴

What made the situation somewhat unusual in Minnesota was the large percentage of newspaper-owned stations. At the end of April, 1922, there were reportedly only eleven such stations in the country, a figure which did not include the stations owned by Twin Cities papers. It was this newspaper competition that sparked such a great interest in Minnesota and provided later for a face-saving way out of the mess in which the papers found themselves.⁵

Evidently Thomas J. Dillon, managing editor of the *Tribune*, got the idea of a broadcasting station after closely watching the successful work of the *Detroit News*. He approached James A. Coles, then on the *Tribune* advertising staff, who had ac-

quired some knowledge of radio during his service with the navy in World War I, and told him to make the necessary arrangements. Coles contacted William R. Beamish, who had recently opened a radio parts store in the front of the Anderson Fixture Company in Minneapolis. Beamish agreed to supply the radio equipment, which was to be placed on the top of the Tribune Building. The studio was to be located on the fifth floor. The *Tribune*, on the other hand, would erect the radio tower and contribute \$500. The two owners would split promotional time.⁶

Meanwhile, Herschel V. Jones, owner-publisher of the *Minneapolis Journal*, returned from California and saw the transmitter tower on the Tribune Building. He was not sure what it meant, except that Frederick E. Murphy, owner of the *Tribune*, was trying to steal a competitive march on him. He immediately sought to beat the *Tribune* on the air. He read of the *Tribune's* plan to operate the station within a fortnight. The same editorial claimed: "It's a great age, and The Tribune believes in keeping up with it, not to say going a bit ahead of it when there is a chance to blaze the way. Prepare ye to cut in on W.A.A.L., the designation of the station that will be atop The Tribune Annex!"⁷

Jones called in George Adams, then managing editor, and told him to get a station in operation before the *Tribune*. If anyone was going to "blaze the way," Jones wanted to be the one. Adams, who knew little or nothing about radio, got in touch with Walter E. Stephenson of the Sterling Elec-

⁴ *Minneapolis Morning Tribune*, April 15, p. 13, April 21, p. 1, 1922; *Minneapolis Journal*, April 21, p. 23, May 11, p. 15, 1922; *St. Paul Pioneer Press*, April 23, 1922, p. 1; William C. Benson, *High on Manitou: A History of St. Olaf College 1874-1949*, 243 (Northfield, 1949); Walt Peters, chief engineer of KFAM, St. Cloud, to the author, March 10, 1969, in possession of the author.

⁵ Barnouw, *A Tower In Babel*, 99.

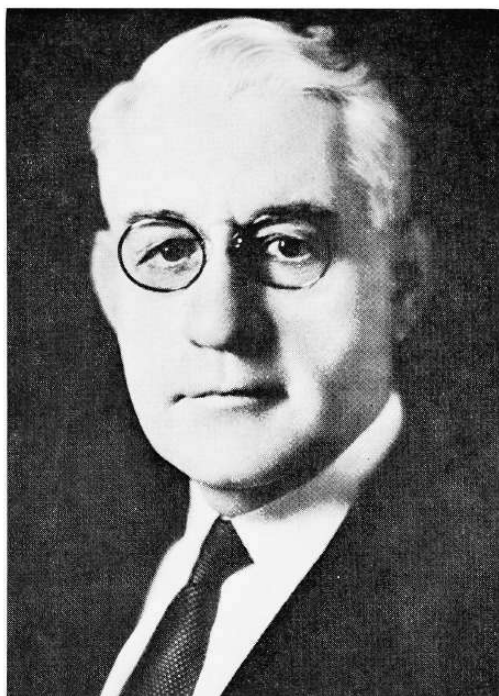
⁶ Interview by the author with James A. Coles, May 23, 1963.

⁷ *Minneapolis Tribune*, April 15, 1922, p. 20.

tric Company in Minneapolis. Because they did not have a powerful transmitter, the partners borrowed one from Northern States Power Company and used it to broadcast before the *Tribune* did. The station, which was given the call letters WBAD, formally opened on the roof of the Radisson Hotel on April 20. WAAL, the *Tribune's* station, broadcast its first program the same evening but a few minutes later.⁸

IT HAD BEEN a close race, but the honor of being the first newspaper to begin regular broadcasting in Minnesota belonged to the *Journal*. While the *Tribune* claimed to be "First in the field of negotiation, first to sign a contract, first to procure a government license, first to erect a station of its own on a building of its own in accordance with government specifications," it soon dropped its boast of being the first to broadcast. Being first was a dubious competitive advantage at best, but the newspapers brawled in their pages over the distinction for several days.⁹

While the battle between the *Tribune* and *Journal* was taking place, the St. Paul Pioneer Press and Dispatch Company was also preparing to enter radio in partnership with the Commonwealth Electric Company. On April 22 the *Pioneer Press's* station, WBAH, began regular programming from the Commonwealth facilities in St. Paul. The *Pioneer Press* never claimed to be the first newspaper in Minnesota to operate a radio station, but it did loudly proclaim its foresight in being "first among the Northwest newspapers to recognize the value and growing importance of radio news . . . by starting a radio column in its



Frederick E. Murphy

Sunday issues." The paper had initially capitalized on the growing interest in receiving and sending sets by publishing a page of radio news on March 12, 1922. After its station went on the air, it devoted two pages each Sunday to the medium. The *Journal* and *Tribune* printed special series on how to construct radios after their stations began broadcasting.¹⁰

The new stations placed an immediate load on the already inundated wave length over which all commercial stations had to broadcast at that time. Arrangements had to be made between all of the stations so that they could broadcast at different hours, otherwise listeners would have picked up a garble of voices, each trying to override the other. In addition, amateur broadcasters had to have a time slot in which to have their say. Finally, a silent period had to be open weekly, whereby local listeners could pick up distant broadcasts, including those from the *Detroit News*.

Why did the newspaper publishers join

⁸ Coles interview; Walter E. Stephenson memorandum, undated, in the Sterling Electric Company files; *Minneapolis Journal*, April 20, 1922, p. 1; *Minneapolis Tribune*, April 21, 1922, p. 16.

⁹ *Minneapolis Journal*, April 21, 1922, p. 23; *Minneapolis Tribune*, April 21, 1922, p. 16.

¹⁰ *St. Paul Pioneer Press*, April 23, 1922, p. 1; *Minneapolis Journal*, April 20, 1922, p. 25; *Minneapolis Tribune*, April 18, 1922, p. 2.

department stores, electric companies, and hotels in broadcasting? Undoubtedly it was good publicity for them, although the use of advertising over radio was almost universally unacceptable in 1922. The Dayton Company reflected this attitude when it put WBAH on the air May 10. In its premier broadcast the company claimed that "no attempt will be made to carry on direct advertising or propaganda for the store." The reasons were that there is a "ruling against such use and also because it is believed such use would not be for the best interests of radio development."¹¹

How then could owners take advantage of the publicity? The newspapers could publicize their own stations in their columns and their publications through announcements. The Dayton Company showed ingenuity by taking advantage of the interest in its new station. It placed a five-column advertisement in the *Journal*, with the headline "Listening In—on the broadcasted news about the Dayton famous May Shirt Sale, thousands of men will come to know about two of the most extraordinary lots of Shirts yet offered." The piece was cleverly illustrated with men sporting the shirts and earphones.¹²

There may also have been a desire upon the part of some owners to help develop the medium, as the *Journal* claimed in an editorial entitled "The New Minneapolis Product": "The radio telephone is still a toy, a novelty, whose practical worth in everyday life is yet to be more fully worked out. By encouraging its use, The Journal believes that it is aiding in radio development and is hastening the day when the contrivance will be as common and as useful as the automobile and other machines that have been developed from purely pleasure devices. For every radio fan in this region has already learned that these waves are offering him in his own home programs of real worth. Furthermore, their stamp of 'Minneapolis' has already proved that they are quality goods." This altruism, which was expressed by all the publishers,

is questionable, as later developments should indicate.¹³

Who listened to the programs? How many listeners were there? These are natural, but apparently unanswerable, questions. From the beginning it was obvious that there were numerous potential listeners in the range of Twin Cities' transmitters. Since there had been a boom in amateur broadcasting following the war, there were many people with sets to listen in on the late evening chatter and music. According to H. DeRoe Jones, chairman of the Executive Radio Council of the Twin Cities, there were approximately four thousand receivers in or near the Twin Cities during 1922, and the number was growing "at a tremendous rate." There were nearly four hundred sending stations alone in April, 1922. Thus, this hard core group of enthusiasts provided a ready-made audience for enthusiastic broadcasters. Electric companies selling radio receivers designed their advertisements to augment this audience. The Twin City Radio Club, which amateur set builders and broadcasters had founded as the Minneapolis Wireless Association in May, 1910, generated more interest in the medium. In January, 1921, the club began to publish *Kick Backs*, a popular monthly magazine formerly owned by the Executive Radio Council of the Twin Cities.¹⁴

Entertainment was the staple of early radio, although there were news and weather reports, too. Naturally there were attempts to see how effective the newly harnessed medium would be under special conditions. For this reason and for publicity, radio broadcasts were sent from deep caves and airplanes. Twin Cities newspa-

¹¹ Sidney Head, *Broadcasting in America*, 122 (Boston, 1956); *Minneapolis Journal*, May 11, 1922, 15 (quote).

¹² *Minneapolis Journal*, May 15, 1922, p. 13.

¹³ *Minneapolis Journal*, April 22, 1922, p. 4.

¹⁴ *Minneapolis Tribune*, April 23, 1922, sec. 14, p. 4 (quote); for sample advertisements, see *Kick Backs*, 2:15, 20, 23 (June, 1922); "Minneapolis Wireless Association 1910," in *Kick Backs*, 3:6 (April, 1923).

pers reported a radio chess game between the Universities of Wisconsin and Minnesota. The fact that passengers on a train leaving town were able to maintain contact with local radio stations was thought important enough for news coverage. The *Journal* considered the first radio equipped bus in the United States deserving of special attention, especially since the vehicle was made in Minnesota and ran between Minneapolis and St. Cloud. While a few of these experiments actually indicated useful improvements in radio, most were simply dramatic or interest-arousing incidents with little worth.¹⁵

Running a radio station was exciting, no doubt, and even dangerous. For instance, a fifty-voice boys' choir was scheduled to perform over WBAD one evening. Just before the boys were to go on the air, Robert H. Andrews, a *Journal* reporter whose afterhours duties consisted of publicity, programing, and stand-by announcing,

"found them sitting on the cornice along the [Radisson] hotel front, leaning out over ten stories of space, dropping paper-sack water-bombs on the traffic far below. They swore they'd jump off before they'd sing for nothing. Several of them nearly fell." By the time he persuaded them to return to safety, the station engineer was through for the day and Andrews was through with radio. He resigned from WBAD.¹⁶

The problem of cost was constant and significant. WBAD's facility in the Radisson Hotel was a temporary one. The station planned to expand considerably after it replaced its temporary license with a regular permit. The *Journal* signed a contract with the Western Electric Company for "the largest and most powerful broadcasting outfit built under patent license in the United States for private operation." It was to be the same as the one used by the *Detroit News* radio station, which was familiar to Minnesotans. A ninety-day delivery date was announced. The *Pioneer Press* hoped to erect antennae on the roof of the St. Paul Athletic Club, at the projected cost of \$15,000.¹⁷

The publishers of the newspapers were having second thoughts, however. True,

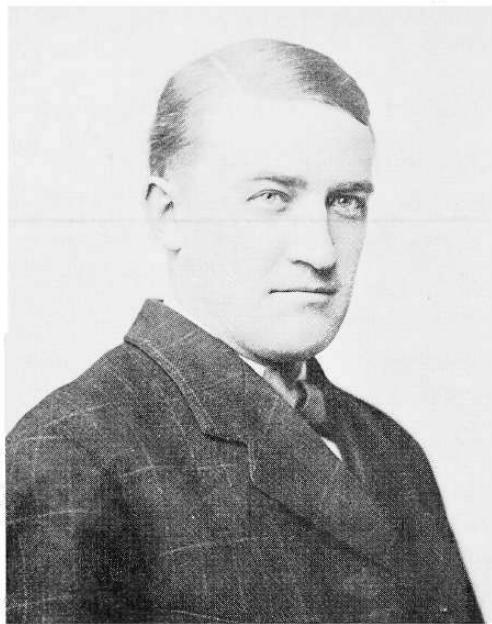
¹⁵ *Minneapolis Journal*, May 3, p. 11, June 25, p. 14, 1922.

¹⁶ Robert Hardy Andrews, *A Corner of Chicago*, 14 (Boston, 1963).

¹⁷ *Minneapolis Journal*, April 20, 1922, p. 1; *St. Paul Pioneer Press*, April 23, 1922, p. 1.

"A Radio Freak"
was the caption
on this cartoon
from the March 10,
1923, issue of
Kick Backs.





J. A. O. Preus in 1918

fan mail had been enthusiastic and the newspapers had received a great deal of favorable publicity over the air and in their own news columns. But fan mail did not pay bills, and the hard realities of providing adequate broadcasting facilities along with competent personnel began to shake the resolve of Twin City publishers to remain in broadcasting and "lead the way."

Why and how the three publishers quit broadcasting is a complex question. Marc Frazer, who distributed receivers for the Cutting and Washington Radio Corporation in Minneapolis, had received permission from that firm in 1921 to build its receiving sets if he would establish a commercial radio station with a 500-watt Western Electric transmitter. He had been able to interest another amateur enthusiast, Walter S. Harris, in the proposition. Together they had formed the Radio Engineering Company, with Harris as president and Frazer as vice-president and treasurer. Because of the enormous cost of the transmitter, Frazer approached Frederick Murphy of the *Tribune* to see if he wanted to join the venture. Over lunch at Schiek's

Cafe in Minneapolis, Murphy, Paul Murphy, advertising manager of the *Tribune*, Coles, and Frazer discussed the venture. Thomas Dillon, the managing editor, advised against the scheme. He had been watching the *Detroit News*' efforts closely and told Murphy it would cost too much for equipment and the large staff needed to maintain the station and answer correspondence. Frazer then went to other men and businesses in an effort to get someone interested. When the negotiations were nearly completed, Murphy called the other two publishers to discuss ways they could leave the broadcasting business.¹⁸

After acting upon his agreement with Walter Stephenson of the Sterling Electric Company to order a new transmitter, Herschel Jones of the *Journal* had backed out because he felt it was "not advisable to go ahead." This apparently was before Frazer talked with Stephenson and others about a new station. No one was informed of Jones' decision. The latter had accomplished his goal of gracefully bowing out of broadcasting by allowing economic forces to play upon the other radio men in town.¹⁹

The problem had become critical. How could the newspapers drop their stations without arousing public criticism? Following a meeting with the publishers, Governor J. A. O. Preus devised a "plan for centering radio broadcasting in the twin cities in the University of Minnesota and under its control." All three papers published a letter from Preus in which he cited the duplication of expensive equipment and the danger that "the federal government will step in and limit the number of stations. . . . The state university," he noted, "may well be the distributing center for all useful information, but particularly because

¹⁸ Charles F. Sarjeant, ed., *The First Forty: The Story of WCCO Radio*, 66 (Minneapolis, 1964); Marc Frazer to Sterling Electric Company, August 2, 1922, in the files of the Sterling Electric Company; *Minneapolis Journal*, June 24, 1922, p. 1.

¹⁹ Stephenson memorandum, Sterling Electric Company.

it can and does send out information which is of special value to the farmers of the Northwest." The *Pioneer Press* indicated its approval of the scheme and added "As all private broadcasting stations are now ordered by the government to use the same wave length the present stations are, by mutual agreement, operating at different times, the result being that no more service is being given than if there was but one station in continuous operation each evening."²⁰

The newspapers readily agreed to the governor's proposal but did nothing to im-

plement it. Then, late in June, they publicly announced their decision to drop the stations. "It is planned, with the discontinuance of the newspapers' stations, to have a most complete program broadcast from the University daily." The *Journal* and *Tribune* published the story, but the *Pioneer Press* ignored it.²¹

On September 1 WBAD left the air following a broadcast headlined by the Williams Dancing Academy Orchestra. The next day WAAL closed with a concert by the Minneapolis Municipal Opera Company. Three days later the *Pioneer Press* broadcast its last program, which featured Billy Markwith and the Brown Saxophone Six. The Commonwealth Electric Company, which had shared the facility, continued to operate the station.²²

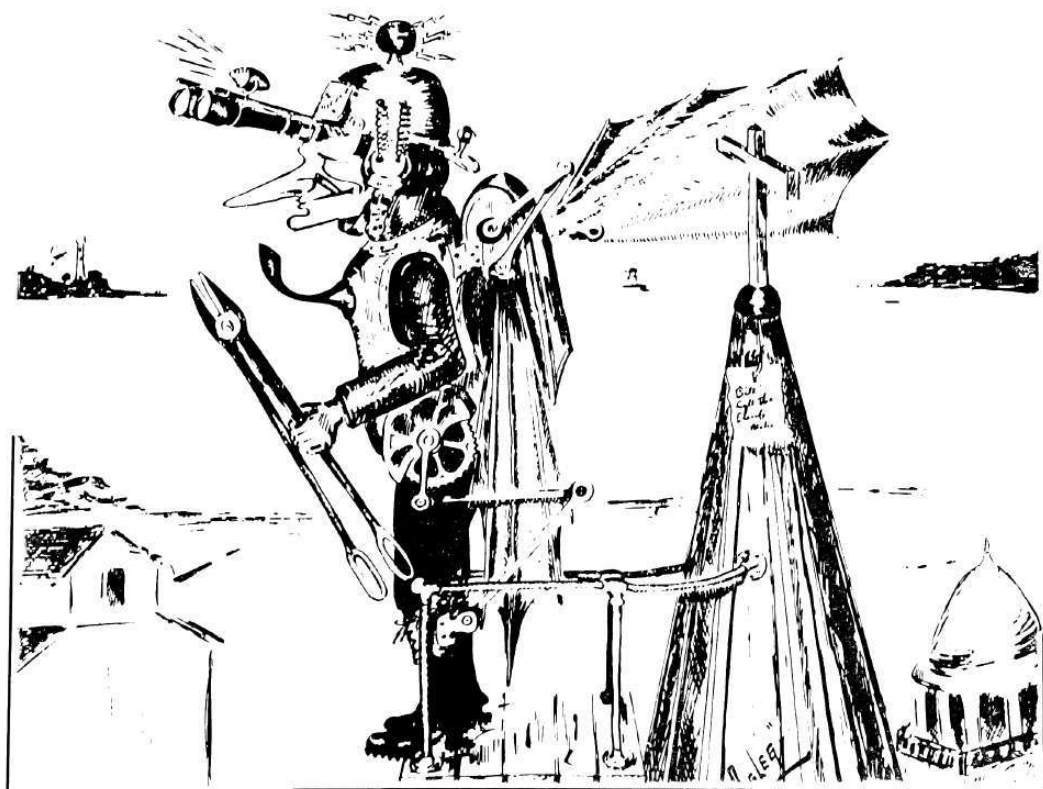
WHETHER the newspapers really intended for WLB to receive the bulk of at-

²⁰ *St. Paul Pioneer Press*, May 14, 1922, p. 1 (quotes); *Minneapolis Journal*, May 14, 1922, p. 1; *Minneapolis Tribune*, May 14, 1922, sec. 12, p. 1.

²¹ *Minneapolis Tribune*, June 23, 1922, p. 11 (quote); *Minneapolis Journal*, June 22, 1922, p. 1.

²² *Minneapolis Journal*, September 2, 1922, p. 3; *Minneapolis Tribune*, September 2, 1922, p. 6; *St. Paul Pioneer Press*, September 5, 1922, p. 16.

A "Traffic Cop" of the Ether" appeared in *Kick Backs* on April 10, 1922.





WLAG's transmitter room in the Oak Grove Hotel

tention after they left the field, the facts are that the Harris-Frazer-directed combine was able to open station WLAG in the Oak Grove Hotel on September 4, 1922, on a thirteen-hour daily basis. The firms which underwrote the new station included: Sterling Electric Company, which had been a partner with the *Journal*; Findley Electric Company, which had closed its own station, WCE, in time to enter the combine; Powers Mercantile Company; E. E. Atkinson and Company; L. S. Donaldson Company; Northwestern National Bank; the *Northwest Farmstead*, a semimonthly magazine; and Funk and Waldo, Minneapolis piano dealers. WLB of the University of Minnesota was asked to share in the new commercial station. It did so for quite a while, but eventually found it necessary to re-establish its own broadcasting schedule from the university.²³

The start of WLAG's transmission marked the end of a brief but eventful period of radio history in Minnesota. In an effort to work out a viable system of broadcasting, three stations — WBAD, WAAL, and WCE — had left the air in September, 1922. However, two others began broadcasting soon after they left: WLAG, which

was an amalgam of stations and subscribers, and WCAS, which was the Dunwoody Industrial Institute station. Of the eleven stations that were broadcasting in Minnesota during the first nine months of 1922, only three are still on the air today: WLAG, which became WCCO; WLB, which is KUOM of the University of Minnesota; and WCAL of St. Olaf College. KUOM and WCAL now share the same frequency.²⁴

The year 1922 was not the "golden age" of broadcasting in Minnesota, but it was the start. The trials of that period helped shape the development of radio in the state for years to come.

²³ Frost, *Education's Own Stations*, 215; Sarjeant, *The First Forty*, 66; *Minneapolis Journal*, June 24, 1922, p. 1.

²⁴ John P. Walsle, president of Dunwoody Industrial Institute, to the author, March 13, 1969, in possession of the author; 1969 *Broadcasting Yearbook*, B-91 — B-93 (Washington, D.C., 1969).

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