

# PIONEERING in TELEVISION in the TWIN CITIES

Joe Beck



## IN A COMPREHENSIVE VIEW

of the Twin City Television Lab's training studio, students demonstrate the many and varied roles necessary to produce television broadcasts. They include: 1. program director; 2. writer; 3. technical director; 4. video operator; 5. audio operator; 6. film projectionist; 7. lighting technician; 8. camera operator; 9. mike boom operator; 10. performers; 11. floor manager; 12. property manager; 13. scene designer; 14. stage carpenter; 15. musicians; 16. music librarian; 17. title and display artist; 18. announcer. The lab offered courses in each of these areas. The photo is from an advertising leaflet for the school.

WHEN FELLOW FACULTY MEMBERS and students honored Joe Beck with a dinner and roast on April 28, 1979, he could reminisce about a full and varied career. Joseph H. Beck was born in New York City 70 years ago, but having a strong distaste for that town, he moved to the Midwest where he graduated from the University of Wisconsin in 1934. He later received a master's degree in speech and communications from the University of Minnesota in 1962. He organized the Beck School for Radio in Minneapolis in 1937 and followed with the Twin City Television Lab in 1947. Upon the demise of these projects, he worked for an advertising agency and as a shoe salesman. In 1959 he received an invitation from Sam Houston State University in Huntsville, Texas, to join its faculty and teach radio and television. As his retirement at the end of the 1978-79 academic year approached, he was moved to recount his experiences as an industry pioneer for this Minnesota History article. Though retired, Joe is pursuing a lifetime interest in playwriting and is scheduled to teach public speaking and creative writing in Houston this fall.

IN THE CITY that Mary Tyler Moore and friends helped make famous in the 1970s via television, there was hardly any TV at all only thirty years ago. This was true not only in Mary's "home town," Minneapolis, but also in St. Paul and, for that matter, in most of the rest of the country. By the mid-1940s my own mission was decided. More than anything, I wanted to be in television, to be part of its growth and do what I could to help promote its acceptance in the Twin Cities area. You could call it the start of an ego trip, but in those days I felt it only as an urge to be among the pioneers who were convinced of the immensity of this new medium.

In most other towns across the country during the late 1940s, the infant industry was in retarded growth. It

was not that the miracle medium looked unpromising or that electronic equipment was still in wartime short supply. It was because people in a position to accelerate television's development did not realize its potential and therefore were not willing to invest in nourishing the limitless possibilities of the expensive new baby. Feisty department store tycoon Bernard Gimbel, in an impassioned speech I remember hearing him make in 1945 to a New York City audience of curious but cautious radio broadcasters, said that television needed brave men and brave dollars. Brave dollars for television were scarce in 1945.

Gimbel certainly was correct. He might have added that television needed even more than brave dollars. It also needed rank-and-file missionaries and a few front-line crusaders. Missionaries and crusaders, like brave dollars, were pathetically few for television in the mid-1940s.

Many of us logically assumed that established AM sound broadcasters would jump at the chance to expand into sight broadcasting after a quarter century of building nation-wide audience acceptance of radio. But it was not so. Radio people held back while equipment manufacturers (that is, Westinghouse, Philco, General Electric, Zenith, Du Mont Laboratories), department stores (like Wanamaker's, Gimbel's), and others in business and industry showed serious interest. Jack R. Poppele, president of the newly organized Television Broadcasters Association (TBA), complained in 1947 of radio's "indifference" to emerging television.<sup>1</sup> As early as 1939 the *Minneapolis Tribune* ran a story crediting Minneapolis radio station WCCO (CBS affiliated) with an encouraging assist to visiting Philco television representatives who were in town to demonstrate the possibilities of television.<sup>2</sup>

You could trace my earliest identification with television back to 1945. In that year the ABC-affiliated radio station WTCN in Minneapolis hired me as its first "television director."<sup>3</sup> My responsibilities were threefold: (1) to work with the station's chief engineer, John Sherman, in preparation of the required Federal Communications Commission TV station application form; (2) to prepare WTCN's radio-experienced staff for the station's eventual radio/TV operation; and (3) in WTCN's name to promote television in the Twin Cities area. Particular attention naturally was given to prospective advertisers. We were acutely aware that General Mills, Pillsbury, Minneapolis-Honeywell, Minnesota Mining and Manufacturing Company, and a host of other major firms made the Twin Cities their home base, and we counted on them to recognize the potential advertising benefits of television.

My job with WTCN put me in a favorable position to observe — and feverishly absorb — major developments in television in 1945 once wartime technical restrictions

<sup>1</sup>"There are few AM station operators in television today and there are few AM station operators who have indicated anything more than a passing interest in this new art of broadcasting. This lack of foresight is going to prove costly in a relatively few years!" Jack R. Poppele, Letter to the Editor, *Broadcasting*, September 29, 1947, p. 42.

<sup>2</sup>"PRACTICAL DEMONSTRATION OF TELEVISION ENTERTAINS AUDIENCE IN MINNEAPOLIS.

"Disregarding extravagant claims which have been made for this long-awaited manifestation, an audience of several hundred persons in WCCO's studio auditorium saw a practical demonstration of television Thursday night.

"They saw television of the present — as distinguished from what has gone before, or what may lie ahead. Similar demonstrations, by a group of officials from the Philco Radio and Television corporation, will be given for selected groups Friday." *Minneapolis Tribune*, May 5, 1939, p. 10.

<sup>3</sup>*Broadcasting*, September 10, 1945, p. 62. WTCN's promotion department announced my appointment to the industry in a less than humble "Meet Joe Beck" introductory ad. 0026-5497/79/0015-275 \$01.75/0

were lifted. With nobody at WTCN in Minneapolis knowing more about television than I did, I was rated the "expert."

But I moved to qualify myself as such by the only means I could think of at the time. I went east to the center of activity. That was, of course, mainly in New York City but also in Philadelphia and Schenectady, New York (General Electric headquarters). These were the TV stations which Wayne Coy, then FCC Commissioner, credited with keeping the art alive. And I made sure to take my personal 16-mm movie camera with me, returning with on-the-scene action pictures made in the three eastern cities, a film that printed up to two reels and about twenty minutes of pretty exciting information.

These films were very instructive, indeed, and in some ways inspiring, because they included sequences demonstrating what these eastern pioneers could teach us. Of course, the relatively crude and cumbersome TV cameras, radio-oriented studio and control-room facilities, artless TV programming of the mid-1940s, and naïve lighting "fixtures" of the period gradually became obsolete. Thirty years after it was made, the film that demonstrated these wonders yields unexpected dividends: it reveals early broadcasting techniques to today's communications students.

In 1945 and 1946 Twin Cities showings of these "documentaries" stirred considerable interest. Sometimes response was surprising, like the unsophisticated questions of some otherwise knowledgeable Minneapolis and St. Paul advertising men who asked, should we move in now or wait until television has proved to be more than a fad? They shared a concern that television could not overcome competition from radio and the movies.<sup>4</sup>

The general public, however, showed signs of believing in television's future. So did WTCN's owners and management, who nevertheless had to proceed with caution because their dollars apparently did not match whatever bravery they may have felt. In other places I did find believers, and people who wanted to believe but who needed more information before they would invest time and money. Some of these I had the great pleasure of meeting during a trip I made to Hollywood early in 1947 on behalf of WTCN. In that year not many people high in the movie hierarchy had conceded "if you can't lick 'em, join 'em." Not yet! But two well-known Hollywood personalities who, I had been informed, were "television-minded," Edgar Bergen and Joseph Cotten, had already given serious thought to the implications and inevitability of television — and, of course, how it would influence the art and business of movie-making. Naturally we were pleased, as any Charlie McCarthy fans would have been, when Mr. Bergen invited my wife and me to sit in on a meeting — it was the very first (and very informal) meeting — of the new Academy of Television



*A YOUNG Joe Beck mans a TCTL camera placed high in the grandstand at the 1947 Minnesota State Fair.*

Arts and Sciences. As first president of the Academy, Mr. Bergen in his opening remarks introduced "Mr. and Mrs. Beck from Minneapolis, Minnesota, who are also interested in television." Also interested! It was, I felt then, as if he were welcoming us as part of the comparatively small but growing company of true believers in the future of the brand new medium.

WTCN was still involved in a planned delaying action, so I "went into business for myself." Well, not exactly for myself. After parting company with the station I set out to find somebody who would bring enough "brave dollars" into a new enterprise. I found him in William E. Gage of St. Paul. We met, talked a while, and reached agreement on many points. The new firm would operate under the corporate name of Beck Studios, Inc., and I would hold 51 per cent of the stock ownership.

The biggest asset I brought into the project in 1947 was my professional experience in the broadcasting business, dating back to 1935 when I came from a radio advertising job in Chicago to Minneapolis as production manager of Mid-West Recordings, Inc., producers of

<sup>4</sup>Interview, Joe Beck with Mel Jass, undated, verified in an interview with Mel Jass by Sally Rubinstein, July 25, 1979.

recorded material for radio broadcast. I resigned in 1937 to start the Beck School for Radio. At a time when the need for "pre-qualified" (as opposed to "non-experienced") announcers was acute, especially among smaller radio stations around the country, the Beck School had realistically trained, and found jobs for, hundreds of young announcers in the Upper Midwest and many other states.

One of these young men, a 1940 graduate, was Winona native Jack G. Thayer who worked his way to the very top in radio. As a radio-struck high school student, Jack had almost daily haunted the local radio station, KWNO, where he had been befriended by the station's chief announcer, Jack London, a recent graduate of the Beck School for Radio. London recommended the Minneapolis school and that was the beginning of Thayer's career, leading to his appointment as president, NBC Radio Division, in August, 1974.<sup>5</sup>

The only organizations noticeably pushing television in the Twin Cities area were Stanley E. Hubbard's NBC-affiliated radio station KSTP in St. Paul and my company's non-affiliated (and underfinanced, but brave!) Beck Studios, Inc., in Minneapolis. KSTP promoted television mainly by routine publicity and live studio demonstrations and eventually by going on the air as KSTP-TV on April 23, 1948, on Channel 5. A month earlier NBC had announced "the first station affiliation contract in the history of television" with KSTP, effective March 17, 1948.<sup>6</sup>

Bravely — maybe quixotically — Beck Studios started blazing fresh TV trails in 1947. While retaining the radio school as one of three divisions, we added a television lab school and planned for a commercial television broadcasting station. When the Twin City Television Lab (TCTL) opened its doors in April of that year, we felt great strength and confidence. We were ready; the format seemed ideal. We were sure the industry needed us. Our future looked bright indeed.

The lab was painstakingly planned by Mel Jass (tele-

vision production training unit), Gordon W. Johnson (chief engineer), Bill Gage (assistant engineer), Ernest S. ("Bill") Colling (director of training), and myself. In 1947 we completed our extensive renovation and installed the requisite new equipment. We occupied over 11,000 square feet of studios, classrooms, and offices on three floors directly adjacent to the theater auditorium itself in the Lyceum Theatre Building at 85 Eleventh Street South in downtown Minneapolis. (The old Lyceum Theatre stood where the beautiful new plaza complex now houses the Minnesota Symphony Orchestra.)

To bolster existing personnel, we went to the only available place, New York City, for a starting nucleus of three or four people already experienced in television. To lure the best people we could afford away from the big town we had to offer (for us) big salaries. We came back with contracts signed by three talented young men and one old pro who was exactly right to lead our new training program. He was Bill Colling, NBC Television program director since 1940. He had been associated with NBC radio and television in New York for fifteen years and had produced shows for the unveiling of television to the American public at the 1939 World's Fair in New York City.<sup>7</sup>

The "youngsters" recruited for the staff included serious, hard-working Fred Kaufman, formerly of the studio operations and program departments for WABD, the Allen Du Mont network flagship television station in New York. Urbane, articulate actor-director Victor Caveness had received the American Theatre Wing award for directing and producing the prize television dramatic production of the 1947-48 season. Also signed to a contract at this time was personable, competent David Gaines who had also worked with NBC-TV.<sup>8</sup>

And there was Mel Jass, my loyal right hand and close confidant for almost ten years. He had made the trip to New York in early 1947 to help pick a staff. Like many others who made the transition to TV, he began his own broadcasting career as a radio announcer and joined Beck Studios in 1946. In our young organization Mel was incredibly the right man in the right job at the right time. The only thing stereotyped about his multiple functions was his job title: director of public relations. He was a lot more; he had to be. Maybe it is mixing metaphors, but if I were the company's "spark plug" (so described by others), Mel Jass was the catalyst that kept things running.<sup>9</sup>

The lab's personnel was a blend of visionary-realists who were knowledgeable about television and how it could develop. From its early days in spring, 1947, the TCTL staff members who made things happen in Minneapolis and St. Paul television were dedicated specialists with a strong background in television. Although theater, films, and radio were part of the training for some of us, the emphasis was strictly on television in

<sup>5</sup>Jack Thayer to Joe Beck, October 11, 1974. Letter in author's possession.

<sup>6</sup>"KSTP-TV First Station to Join NBC Video Network. NBC last week announced the signing of the first station affiliation contract in the history of television by Stanley E. Hubbard, KSTP-TV St. Paul-Minneapolis president, and Frank E. Mullen, the network's executive vice president." *Broadcasting*, March 22, 1948, p. 17.

<sup>7</sup>*Minneapolis Times*, April 5, 1948, p. 18; Sydney W. Head, *Broadcasting in America: A Survey of Television and Radio*, 191 (2nd ed., Boston, 1972).

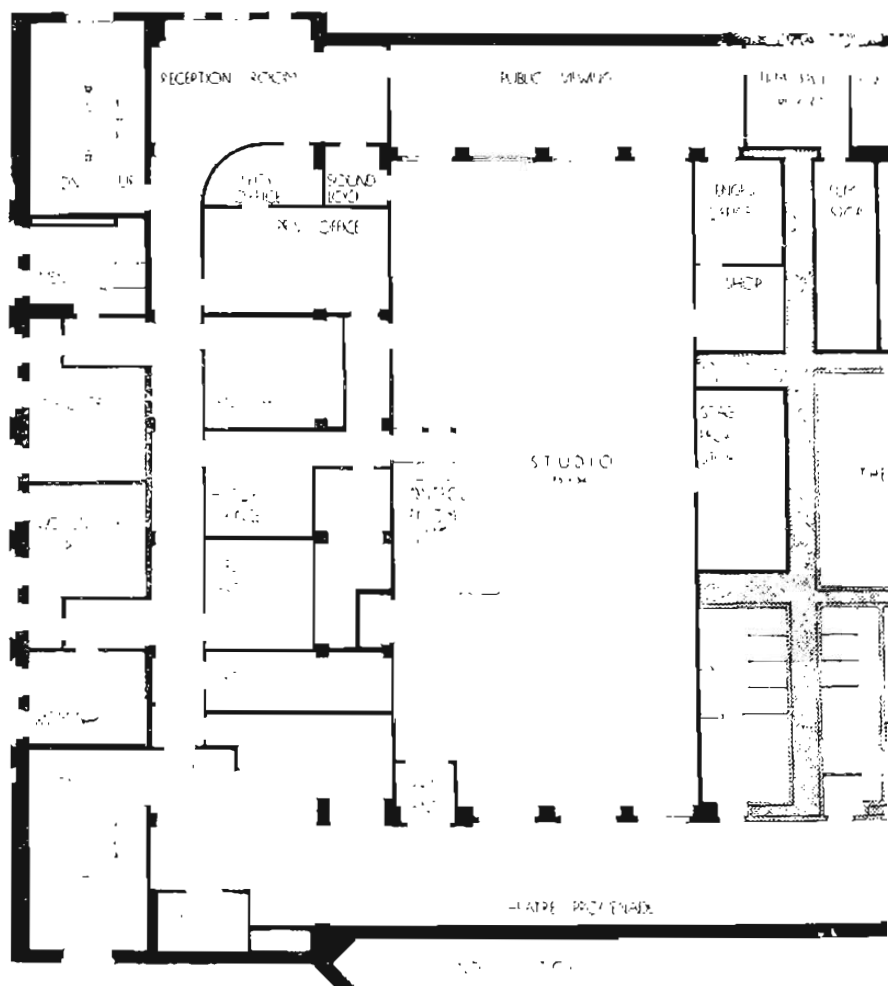
<sup>8</sup>Personnel files, NBC-TV, New York; *TV Times*, July 22-28, 1950, p. 13.

<sup>9</sup>Interview, Mel Jass, July 25, 1979. Jass also was an instructor and director of admissions and finally director of the school. He is now an announcer and special host for WTCN-TV in Minneapolis.

**STUDENTS IN A CLASSROOM** (below) are shown proper camera placement before they enter the studio (right) to practice their newly learned techniques. Little theater groups, professionals, Twin Cities universities and colleges, and music and dancing schools co-operated with TCTL in supplying specialized talent for lab projects.



**EXPERIMENTING** with lighting effects (above) was another part of a student's studio experience. The diagram (right) shows the TCTL broadcasting studio which was adjacent to the second floor of the Lyceum Theatre. Programs for the commercial television station would have originated here.



everything the lab did. Around these people we built a qualified staff who helped us set up and teach professionally oriented television production training classes. At the same time, the lab staff also prepared us for the expected concurrent operation of our commercial television station. Finally, teachers and students working together would provide us with a competent staff and performers for our television station.

"Production experience in the studio, under authentic on-the-air conditions, is the most important activity in the Twin City Television Lab's training program," explained the school's brochure. This emphasis on using the same equipment as found in commercial television studios made the lab unique; no other school in the country was so equipped at this time.

In the classroom, students combined "lecture and discussion with demonstration and preliminary practice." Using live cameras, students could check make-up shades, test colors and textures of fabrics, products, and backgrounds, learn to integrate film and live action, experiment with announcing techniques, and try out new lighting effects. Students also had a well-stocked library, a film projection room, and a workshop with tools for set construction and camera repair at their disposal. The lab staff encouraged local schools to supply talent for our closed-circuit television shows. At other times we took our mobile unit to Twin Cities sports and theater events. Besides training the students, it was good publicity for us. Throughout the courses of study, which could run six to eighteen months, the emphasis realistically was on planning and producing low-budget programs. This was with the small, as well as the large, television station in

mind. Above all, we offered an organization dedicated to developing television people who would direct, perform, write, and handle the cameras, lighting, set design, and building while getting actual studio and behind-the-scenes experience under professional guidance and direction. This master plan made very good sense to us and to a lot of other people in the business.

Locally and nationally we were being recognized. Students, about 10 per cent of them women, came from all parts of the United States, and soon we would begin placing them in jobs. Between 1947 and 1950 TCTL-trained program producers, cameramen, and directors were employed by a growing number of television stations (over 100 by the end of 1949) from New York to California, and formed a core for WTCN-TV and KSTP-TV in their early years. Indeed, Bob Franzen, the current manager of WTCN, was a student at TCTL.<sup>10</sup>

The TCTL's training unit had been in operation a little over a year when *Broadcasting* magazine, in its November 8, 1948, "Market Survey" issue reviewing television's progress in leading cities of the country, reported a prestigious opinion of the Twin Cities' television potential expressed by pioneer television inventor and industry developer, Dr. Allen B. Du Mont. He believed that the Twin Cities had "every promise of being the outstanding area in the country for TV development." He continued by pointing out "that it was the first to offer a full-scale video production training program."<sup>11</sup>

We were, of course, flattered by Du Mont's favorable comment about our organization, and shortly afterward by his acceptance of our invitation to be commencement speaker when TCTL graduated its first group of television producers, directors, and cameramen. In this group was David Brown, who later was to work in Chicago on production for Dave Garroway, in his "Garroway at Large" program, which set the format of NBC's "Tonight" show. Young Brown, versatile and trained in music as well as television, as later recalled by one of his older co-workers in Chicago, "worked mainly with the Wayne King Television series . . . telecast on a regional network through the midwest."<sup>12</sup>

The TV Lab was the answer at that time, so regarded by many broadcasters, advertising people, and broadcast educators. The fact that the TCTL was in full operation a lamentably short time (1947-1950) points up what it might have accomplished had it survived the prolonged (three and a half years) freeze on new station applications, imposed by the Federal Communications Commissioners in September, 1948, and not lifted until April, 1952.<sup>13</sup> That was the Beck Studios' first serious setback. The second, and final, setback resulted from an accident in May, 1949 — a grotesque, untimely quirk of fate nobody could have anticipated. We were defeated not so much because of what we did or did not do; our nemesis was inherent in the industry cliché, "conditions

<sup>10</sup> Interview, Mel Jass, July 25, 1979. Jass recalls that over 1,200 students enrolled at TCTL. See also, *TV Times*, July 8-14, 1950, p. 5.

<sup>11</sup> "Dr. Du Mont [the man who helped design the TV receiver tube and marketed the first American home receiver in 1939] feels the Twin Cities hold every promise of being the outstanding area in the country for TV development. He points out that it was the first to offer a full-scale video production training program." *Broadcasting*, November 8, 1948, Minneapolis-St. Paul Section, p. 12. Du Mont organized and directed a fourth television network in competition with NBC, CBS, and ABC; it was discontinued in 1955. Head, *Broadcasting in America*, 203.

<sup>12</sup> Shirley Iwatiw to Joe Beck, December 29, 1977. Iwatiw is with the License and Standards Administration, WMAQ-TV, Channel 5 (NBC), Chicago. Letter in author's possession.

<sup>13</sup> "Realizing the inadequacy of the existing rules [governing UHF channels, color, and educational television], the FCC stopped processing license applications on September 29, 1948. This started a famous 'freeze.'" There were 108 "pre-freeze" stations. Head, *Broadcasting in America*, 194, 195. Estimates of the length of the freeze ranged from six to nine months; there were 303 applications pending. *Broadcasting*, October 4, 1948, p. 22A. Three additional affected Twin Cities channels were WLWL, WMIN, and KTRV. *TV Times*, June 15-23, 1950, p. 4.



beyond our control." The downfall came after we had first been lifted to the skies high in hope and aspiration.

What were the ingredients of the Twin City Television Lab's success? What did it do to achieve its unusual standing in the young industry in its short life? During those supercharged months of activity, in some ways unprecedented anywhere in the nation, did the TCTL contribute anything toward the Twin Cities' eventual status among the top television markets in the country?

That question, of course, can be answered with conviction only by those who were closely identified with the lab, like former staff members and trainees who have moved up in the business since the lab's demise. Beck Studios, Inc., and its application for Channel 7 are only a statistic in the dead files of the FCC. The Twin City Television Lab is a generally overlooked short paragraph in local history, though hundreds who worked with the lab have not forgotten it. What the lab did will have to speak for itself.

A member of the University of Houston in Texas Department of Communications, longtime teacher of television Dr. Tom C. Battin, once privately gave me his appraisal of the TV Lab. Recently I asked him to put it in writing. He did. "During the 1940's," he wrote, "while I was teaching at a major University [in Florida], I became aware of the excellent set up, highly qualified personnel, and potential of Twin City Television Lab, which I referred to as a Media School and not a Trade School.

"During that time I suggested to my students who were interested in getting into the field of Television, to go ahead and complete their undergrad degree, and then investigate TCTL relative to the training program in TV.

"At that time, this was the logical direction in which to go. Universities were not setting up TV labs due to the cost factor and lack of interest in Television at that time as part of their curriculum.

"During the years that TCTL was in full operation this was the answer to thorough training in the field of Television."<sup>14</sup>

Writing from the office of the interim president of the University of Minnesota in 1974, Dr. E. W. Ziebarth, also a professor of communications, commented that "for those students wishing professional training in the media, a combination of liberal education at a private college or at the university, with the professional work available at the Beck School or the Television Lab made good sense in those years. Such a combination often worked well for the highly motivated student in those years preceding the development of professional curricula in colleges and universities."<sup>15</sup>

The third division of our new corporation was to be a commercial television station in the second-floor space which in optimistic anticipation was already cable-connected to the theater stage. Meanwhile, we had wasted no time filing our application with the FCC for a

license to operate a commercial television station. We expected a normal waiting period of several months for details of processing — finances, management, personnel, engineering — to be completed. We were confident, however, that our application would be approved, all the more confident because we felt that our Washington attorneys — the same firm, Roberts and McGinnis, that counted Allen B. Du Mont Laboratories among its clients — would best represent our interests before the FCC. We dealt mainly with a young member of the law firm, Thad Brown, Jr., whose father had been one of the original FCC commissioners. Now reading like a somber epitaph, the FCC's Application Record notes our application was received March 22, 1948, and filed the same day requesting "Channel 7, 174-180 mc. ERP: Vis. 18.0 kw, Aur. 9.0 kw. Hours of Operation: Unlimited." But, under "Action," the sad aftermath: "Dismissed by Letter, March 11, 1953."<sup>16</sup>

THAT VERY SUMMER, 1947, at the Minnesota State Fair we gave the Twin Cities its first look at live television. We located one of our two new television cameras high in the grandstand seats overlooking the arena and the huge stage. Within the all-concrete exhibit space under the stands was our proud display, telling in print and pictures all about our radio and television training programs, even including floor plans for the television station.

But what grabbed everybody's attention immediately was our inside camera dominating the display. As the crowds gawked and waved at the camera, they could also see themselves and each other on the two receiver screens which were raised well above eye level.

That experience was novelty and excitement enough for the majority of the fair-goers who had never been so close to live telecasting. Some had never seen television of any kind before. These fun-seeking visitors from throughout the state got a big thrill when our engineer alternately switched from the inside to the outside camera, and they could instantly see and hear on our TV screens the track sports events, musical performances, and variety acts as these were occurring in the arena.

Our grandstand camera brought it all to the crowds viewing our monitors. We have no figures, of course, on the actual number of State Fair visitors who saw and heard these grandstand events by way of the television screens in our exhibit. We can only assume that during the twenty grandstand performances that number at

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<sup>14</sup>Tom Battin to Joe Beck, October 10, 1974. Letter in author's possession.

<sup>15</sup>E. W. Ziebarth to Joe Beck, September 30, 1974. Letter in author's possession.

<sup>16</sup>Application Record — Broadcasting, Federal Communication Commission files, Washington, D.C.

least equalled the "record attendance of 324,274" who, the secretary's report states, saw the events from the stands. Large numbers of ticket-holding fair-goers had to pass our display en route to their seats. Harry J. Fuller, superintendent, in his "Report of the Varied Industries Department" on commercial exhibitors stated, "From among the many excellent displays we mention the Beck School of Radio and Television because of the interest created in the latest type of television equipment in their booth."<sup>17</sup>

Monday, September 1, 1947. Labor Day at the Minnesota State Fair, brought still another first — the presence of General Dwight D. Eisenhower and a speech by the popular general in the grandstand arena. Ours, of course, was the only television camera which covered this event. In his short speech Eisenhower commented, "It is the first state fair I've ever attended and I hope I have made a good beginning by visiting the greatest first."<sup>18</sup> It was a first for us, too.

The surpassingly unforgettable event, however, in connection with our Minnesota State Fair TV demonstration occurred on the sultry evening of August 25, 1947.<sup>19</sup> A man died and our camera was there to see — and reveal to others — how he died. It was a dubious distinction but likely another TV first we could claim for our young company.

Our outside cameraman happened to be covering the action for us when this man met his accidental death, witnessed personally by thousands in their seats and indirectly by the television viewers who stood aghast before our television receivers. Yet the emotional impact on our inside viewers must have been greater, because Sig Dahlquist, our cameraman, had chosen to use the telephoto lens to allow us to see this particular performance close-up.

I saw what happened that night, together with those who stood watching Lloyd Rellim go through his precarious high-altitude act, up close on the television screens. Thanks to our camera location, telephoto lens, our cool-headed cameraman, and the efficient flood- and spotlighting provided by the management, we could see the "action" better than could most of the 20,000 in their seats. Actually, Rellim was performing on what I distinctly recall was an incredibly small chrome unicycle going round and round on a circular platform high in the air. I could plainly make out his face and his glistening vehicle on our screens.

Suddenly he and the unicycle went over the edge. Through it all, Sig Dahlquist, a former radio school stu-

dent now eager to prove himself in television, handled himself and the camera with the presence of mind and efficiency of a veteran news cameraman. When called upon to man the outside camera for this show, Sig had had only a few hours experience on this brand new camera. (All the television gear, already delayed in delivery, had been expensively rushed in from New Jersey via air freight in time for our use at the fair.)

Understandably shaken by the accident, Sig told me later that he did what he thought a cameraman should do — cover the action no matter what. So, when the man fell Sig followed him to the ground with the camera, too stunned to think of doing anything else.

Although the sad incident was an unscheduled by-product of our serious intention to bring television to the people in our area, it had an amusing sequel. The following morning a newsman telephoned me to say that he had heard that our television camera covered the fall and could we spare any of the pictures. How's that for naïveté!

Of course, we might have had pictures if we had taped the accident. But recording electronic pictures on magnetic tape was still an engineer's dream. The closest the Beck Studios' Twin City Television Lab ever came to videotaping was quite indirect. But in 1950 the lab did contribute to the early development of video tape.

That year, the Minnesota Mining and Manufacturing Company of St. Paul rented the use of our cameras, control panels, and signal-generating equipment to determine if video signals could be captured on magnetic tape as audio signals could. Two electronics engineers were assigned by 3M to the project at TCTL daily for several months starting at midnight (night production classes of our TV Lab let out at 11:30), and they worked until dawn.

Clark Duffey, public relations supervisor of 3M, searched old company records at my request and came up with some information confirming that "two individuals were directly involved [in the project] — namely, Dr. W[ilfred] W. Wetzel, a well known scientist in the field of magnetic recording who is now deceased and R[obert] J. Youngquist, an electronics engineer still employed by 3M." Duffey verifies with succinct understatement that "the project involving Twin City TV Lab was to determine feasibility of recording video type signals on magnetic tape. Results were positive in that 3M Company did determine one could record video-type signals."<sup>20</sup>

In summer, 1948, Beck Studios entered itself in a Minneapolis parade and thereby made more television history. Minneapolis each year schedules its own kind of Mardi Gras — the Aquatennial. The celebration usually lasts ten days and includes water-related events and two parades, one by day and a repeat performance by night. As the Television Lab had begun operation only four

<sup>17</sup>Annual Report of the Minnesota State Agricultural Society, 6, 53 (St. Paul?, 1947).

<sup>18</sup>Annual Report, 14.

<sup>19</sup>Minneapolis Tribune, August 26, 1947, p. 1.

<sup>20</sup>Clark Duffey to Joe Beck, November 4, 1974. Letter in author's possession.



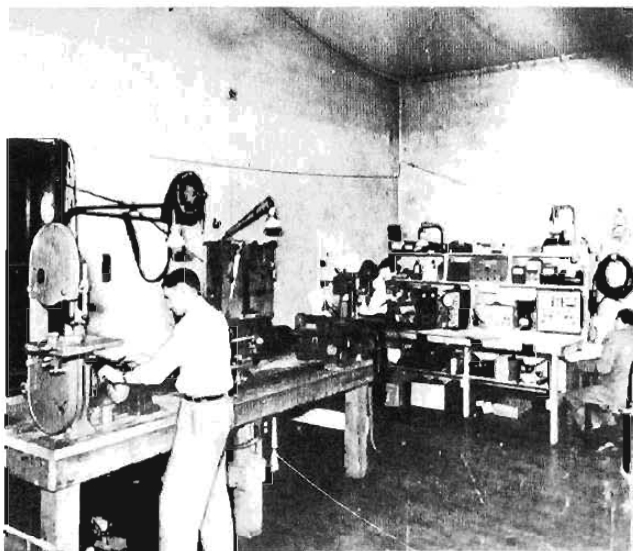


*EARLY BLACK-AND-WHITE television did not pick up all colors equally well. Students had to learn which shades of make-up and background colors would enhance the performer's face and costume.*

months earlier, on April 19, 1948, we thought it important to publicize it and demonstrate the positive reality of television.

Parades, of course, depend on mobility. We did the obvious thing, the only thing: we entered our mobile unit as a "float," first having converted it into an ambulatory, self-contained closed-circuit demonstration and display.<sup>21</sup> Once it had been a Minneapolis school bus which radio station WCCO engineers had altered for mobile radio coverage around town. A few months ear-

*REPAIRING EQUIPMENT and building sets in the lab's shop were part of a student's behind-the-scenes training.*



lier we had bought it from WCCO, and our engineers appropriately re-altered it for television coverage and added a walk-platform on the roof. The six-windowed little vehicle was given a fresh coat of creamy yellow paint and trimmed and lettered in deep forest green. Emblazoned like a banner newspaper headline was the prophetic word "TELEVISION," flanked with lightning bolt symbols, and in smaller letters above the windshield, again proclaiming our mission, appeared "TELEVISION." We had a camera and cameraman on the roof, a 20-inch television receiver poking out of each side (two windows necessarily removed), a portable electric generator trailing behind, and portable television control equipment inside. Spectators intensified their waving in this parade when they could see themselves waving back as the monitor screens passed by.

Shortly before our Aquatennial experiment, the TCTL had also broken ground in still another direction. The June 28, 1948, issue of *Broadcasting* magazine had already reported in its promotion page a short-term coalition between the Twin City Television Lab and General Mills.<sup>22</sup> Although some advertising agency heads

<sup>21</sup> The program listed five divisions in the parade. The fifth division alone had 27 incongruously varied entries. The "Beck Studios, Inc., Float" was listed third in this division. Ahead of us were the Great Northern Railway Co. and the Folk Dance Federation of Minnesota float. Behind our mobile entry demurely marched the Daughters of the Legion Drum and Bugle Corps. There were, of course, many, many bands in the 1948 Grand Parade Minneapolis Aquatennial Presents the 1948 Grand Parade Saturday, July 24th. Copy in author's possession.

<sup>22</sup> "Advantages and possibilities of television medium for food preparation and sale were demonstrated in special booth designed by General Mills Inc. and engineers of Twin City Television Lab., at National Convention of Home Economists. Convention was held at Minneapolis Auditorium, June 21-24. Among features of the 'live' demonstration were audience participation gimmicks, food demonstrations lifted from GE home

had watchfully played the waiting game, other Twin City ad people were quietly making plans for their future in television. Of these, several later were in frequent contact with TCTL personnel and used TCTL facilities to test ideas and program formats for certain of their local accounts. Among these was Russell T. Neff of Knox Reeves Advertising Inc. for his client, General Mills.<sup>23</sup> A joint General Mills-TCTL exhibit to promote a new TV Betty Crocker exhibit at a national home economics convention in Minneapolis outdrew all other exhibits at the 1948 convention. During the convention, candidates for a post-radio tangible Betty Crocker were tested before our cameras — further advancing the cause of television.

In politics and politicking, also, the first stirrings of television's great possibilities in that area excited the forward-looking. Again, *Broadcasting* magazine was kept abreast of the Twin City Television Lab's initiative and enterprise. This time we logically turned to Minneapolis' own former mayor and newly elected United States senator, Hubert H. Humphrey.<sup>24</sup>

kitchens, product presentations and merchandising picture-story, using stills. Demonstrations ran three to four hours a day, using TCTL's Du Mont two-camera field chain." *Broadcasting*, June 25, 1948, p. 92.

<sup>23</sup> Interview, Mel Jass, July 25, 1979. Among other things, the lab tested the photogenic qualities of the Wheaties box.

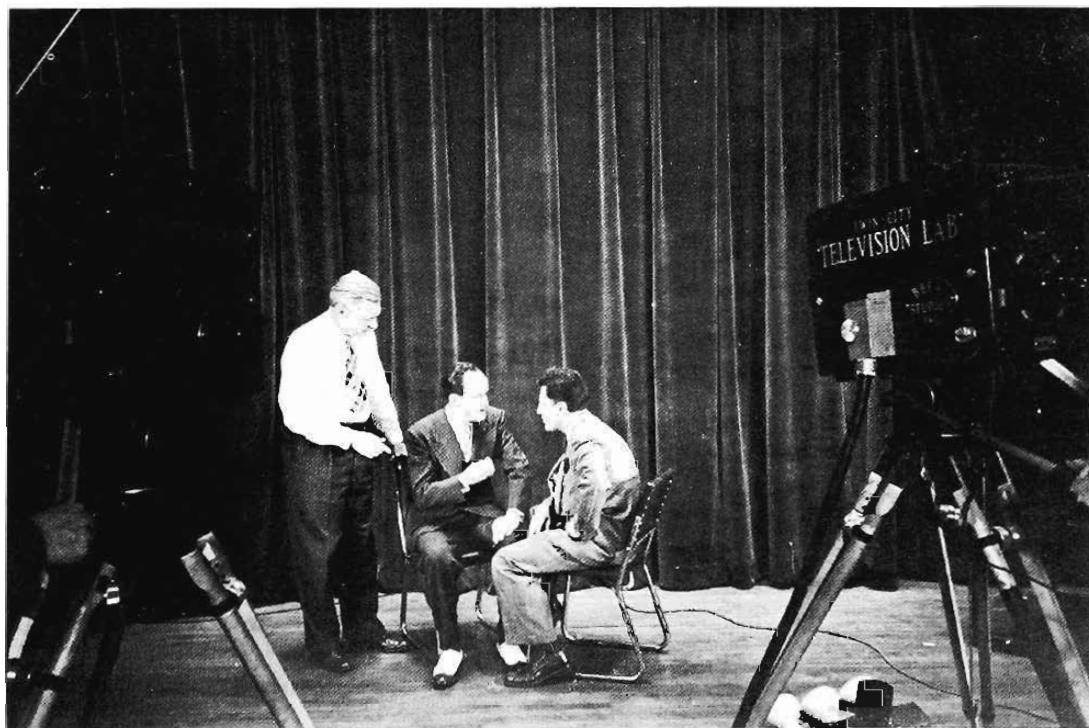
<sup>24</sup> "Senator-elect Hubert H. Humphrey of Minnesota has been brushing up on his political television 'know how' at the Twin City Television Lab. A *Life* photographer covered the training . . . and pictures are expected to appear in an early issue." *Broadcasting*, November 15, 1948, p. 10, November 22, 1948, p. 56.

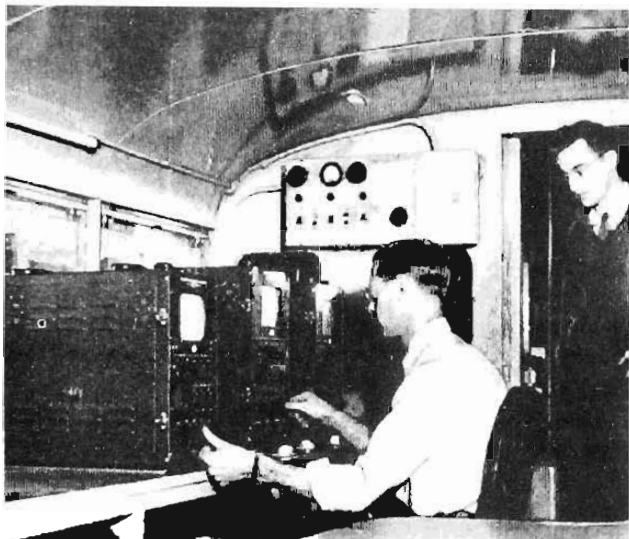
We initiated this venture, but only after a national publication quoted Humphrey as foreseeing how important television was going to be in politics. Because the senator-elect had been a popular mayor and because we thought him very perceptive, we invited him to our studios for a "crash course" in television speaking techniques. Simultaneously, we invited *Life* magazine to send us a photographer, which they did.

We spent the day as planned. Of the excellent pictures taken of Humphrey before our make-up mirrors and Humphrey being advised on television camera manners, one picture I particularly prize shows the youthful "happy warrior" receiving from me a leather make-up kit, engraved with his name. This gift was intended as a grateful memento of his unforgettable day with us. We of the Television Lab could visualize a tremendous picture story spread across the nation, carrying Senator Humphrey's (and our) message of Great Expectations from television in national politics. It was a dazzling concept, and at the lab we thought it was also a masterpiece of promotion. *Life* magazine probably understood our reasoning; not a word nor a picture was printed. The photographer later phoned us from New York to explain almost apologetically that *Life's* editors decided that more newsworthy photos had squeezed us out.

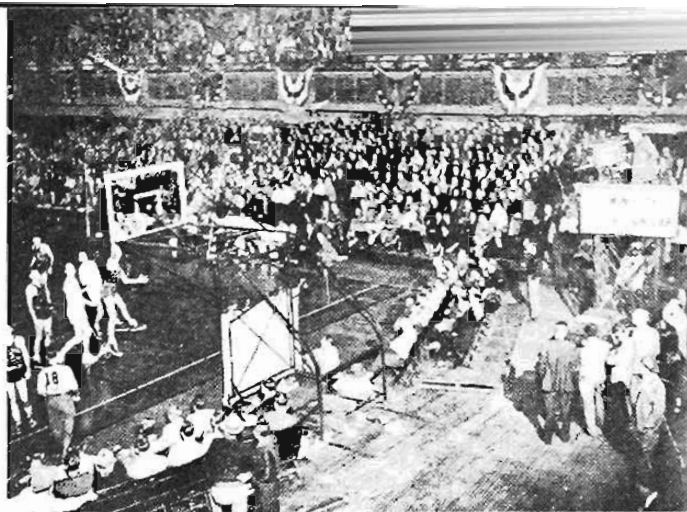
College educators called on the lab early in May, 1949, for opinions and recommendations on television as an educational tool. A group of audio-visual specialists representing universities in five upper Midwest states set up a spring conference in beautiful Itasca State Park

**AFTER APPLY-**  
ING the requisite  
make-up to  
Hubert Hum-  
phrey's face, Bill  
Colling and Mel  
Jass give the  
youthful senator  
some advice on  
television broad-  
cast techniques  
in 1948. The late  
senator quickly  
learned how to  
be effective in  
this new medi-  
um. Photo is by  
Wallace Kirk-  
land, Life Maga-  
zine, © Time Inc.





THE MOBILE UNIT (above) was used to cover local sports events — such as (above right) the former Minneapolis Lakers, world basketball champions — conventions, and fairs. At a General Mills booth (right), note Joe Beck to the left of the camera and Mel Jass at the mike.



BECK STUDIOS' display (above) at the 1947 State Fair drew large crowds as Joe Beck and crew demonstrated television equipment. Always ready to go, the mobile unit (right) stands in front of the Lyceum Theatre and the main entrance of the Twin City Television Lab.



in northern Minnesota. Members of our staff, and my wife and I, were invited to attend.

We discussed, among other things, the fact that the FCC had set aside a channel in the Twin Cities area for exclusive use by educational, non-commercial institutions. Our group expressed the view at the conference that educational broadcasters should not neglect the opportunity in television, as many, by their own admission, had done in radio. Of course, every one of these sound/sight specialists was convinced television was a logical medium for education and information.<sup>25</sup>

But the regrettable consensus was that dollars for television were (and often still are) appropriated with conspicuous lack of bravery in academia. Putting it simply, funding was unavailable at that time for purchase by colleges of costly television equipment.

It seemed prophetic to some of us that we should meet here on this fine spring day in the fresh, unpolluted air of northern Minnesota, deliberating the future needs and possibilities of informational television at the very source of the Mississippi. Like the river itself, we were at the slow, meandering start of what would soon be a swift and spreading current.

And my pretty, dark-eyed young wife was happy to be with us on this combined business and pleasure weekend in a very pleasant setting. She enjoyed the holiday away from tensions of the big city. At home in Minneapolis she was more or less trapped into listening to my shop talk about the great promise of television. Here at the conference she could tactfully avoid joining in the talk about television's future. At the time, of course, we had no way of knowing that her own personal future was less promising, as was mine.

The University of Houston made its move four years later, with the first educational television station in the United States. This was Channel 8, with John C. Schwarzwald as the station's pioneering manager. Not long afterward, in 1956, Schwarzwald was invited up north

to head the newly formed Twin City Area Educational Television Corporation's infant operation, KTCA-TV.<sup>26</sup>

The catastrophe that led to the ultimate demise of TCTL struck on May 27, 1949, a few days after the pleasant Itasca Park conference. On that sunny day a young beer-befuddled cattle truck driver without warning suddenly disputed our side of Minnesota Highway 61 near tiny Miesville as my wife and I were returning home to Minneapolis from Winona. Our mood at the time had been exceptionally happy and hopeful. A Winona bank official would consider favorably, as I later learned, our company's application for a substantial loan that might have insured its survival. Winona had been my wife's birthplace, and her family had excellent bank connections there.

In the head-on collision my wife died instantly; I was the "lucky one" (the truck driver was not hurt). Five months in a Minneapolis hospital did much to restore my damaged body, but not the spirit. With characteristic concern and loyalty, Mel Jass, the one staff member competent to carry on, labored long hours to salvage what could be saved of the daily operation, if not the ultimate purpose, of Beck Studios, Inc., and the Twin City Television Lab. But the trend continued downhill, accelerated by the drafting of high school graduates for the Korean War, until the only alternative was to give up. Cameras and other television equipment were sold to the highest bidder when the lab was forced into bankruptcy. The company closed its doors for good in the fall of 1950.

Today, over a quarter of a century later, it is easy enough to recall pleasant memories of the lab's brave dream and its real accomplishments. The painful ironies leading to its finish still bring a lump to the throat. It may be the height of futility, but there are those with long memories who still ponder with optimism what might have been, if conditions, in particular the three-and-a-half year freeze on new television station license applications that drained our financial resources and the untimely auto accident, had been within our control.

<sup>25</sup>Interview, Mel Jass, July 25, 1979.

<sup>26</sup>"According to all available information, KUHT, Channel 8, Houston was the first non-commercial education television station to commence broadcasting in the United States. . . . the station started a regular schedule of programs during the week of May 25, 1953." James L. Bauer to Joe Beck, May 29, 1979. Letter in author's possession.

Schwarzwald was general manager of the Twin Cities educational division station from 1956 to 1977. Interview with Joseph T. McDermott, KTCA-TV, October 17, 1979.

PHOTOGRAPHS on pages 274, 278, 282, and 284 are from an undated publicity brochure entitled *From Script to Studio: Practical Experience*, published by the Twin City Television Lab. This pamphlet and all other photographs used with this article are in the possession of Joe Beck.



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