

Radio History

by Barry Mishkind

A Race in the South

As the year 1922 began, fewer than two dozen authorized "broadcast" stations were on the air. Although most of the fledgling stations were in either New England or California, that "newfangled thing" called radio was starting to be noticed all over the country.

INTEREST STIRS

Wireless enthusiasts scrambled to be among the first in their area to have a piece of the new radiotelephone service. Curiously, in those days, it really was easy to get a license. Essentially, all you had to do as ask for one.

Of course, they needed backing. Getting a useable transmitter was no trivial matter in those days. Equipment was difficult to obtain and not cheap.

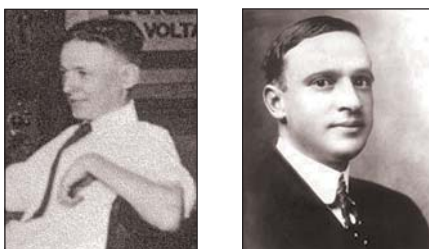
But demand was strong. Indeed, before the year 1922 would end, the infant industry of broadcasting would "explode" from one side of the country to the other, with a total of 570 stations being authorized.

RADIO COMES TO GEORGIA

Among those in the southeast who were interested in broadcasting was an ex-Navy man who had served during the First World War as a ship's wireless operator. After discharge, Walter Tison wanted a job doing something he enjoyed and figured he would put his naval experience to work.

Calling on Major John Cohen, Publisher and Editor of the Atlanta Journal. Tison was determined to sell him on the idea of putting a station on the air.

Tison discoursed enthusiastically on the reasons why the Journal should build a radio station. Depending upon which history you read, Cohen was either a quick convert, seeing the potential public service uses for a radio station or, although truly interested, kept putting young Tison on "hold."



Walter Tison, John Cohen

Of course, this did not happen in a vacuum. The rival newspaper, The Atlanta Constitution was also working on a transmitter, in an attempt to "scoop" their competition.

THE RACE IS ON

Learning that the Constitution was nearly ready, Cohen was determined to get on the air as soon as possible. Equipment was ordered. As the second week of March 1922 ended, both companies had filed requests for licenses for their stations and were eagerly awaiting word from the Department of Commerce in Washington, DC.

The Journal did have one problem: the transmitter manufacturer failed to deliver the unit on time. Expecting their license at any moment, Major Cohen arranged to purchase a transmitter from a local ham and immediately had it installed by Tison and station director George Iler.

Cohen's timing was perfect. A collect telegram arrived on March 15, 1922 and The Journal's new station - WSB - went on the air that very same night, the day before The Atlanta Constitution received its authorization for station WGM.

Being second apparently was an impossible burden for WGM. It was deleted from the Federal List of Broadcast Stations less than a year and a half later, the transmitter donated to Georgia Tech.

ON THE AIR

Pictures of the early transmitters, long before the FCC's Good Engineering Practice (GEP) Rules were put into place, are interesting to see. It is amazing that there was no "epidemic" of electrocuted broadcasters.

Exposed wires, tubes, batteries, generators, microphones, and all sorts of knobs and dials were everywhere. Performers, visitors, engineers and "Danger" signs all shared the cramped makeshift studio/transmitter room.



The performer (Alma Gluck) with her head nearly in the transmitter at WSB. Walter Tison (l) and Ephraim Zimbalist look on. Note the danger sign!

Courtesy: Special Collections Dept., Georgia State University

WSB was not exactly a powerhouse upon its debut. The 100 Watt transmitter was pushed to its limit in transmitting the opening night's programming. According to an employee, to produce the necessary voltage, "fruit jar chemical rectifiers with a lead and zinc-with-Borax solution" were used.

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SODA JERK SAVES RADIO STATION!

According to the story, due to the large current being drawn, the batteries began to "boil over."

Fortunately a drug store was down on the street, five floors below. The Journal staff got the soda jerk to agree to stay open so they could run down periodically for ice, which then was packed in the transmitter to keep it from blowing up. Fortunately, the opening night ceremonies ran out before the ice did.

Radios in the Southeast crackled to life with the greeting "Good evening. This is the Radiophone Broadcasting Station of the Atlanta Journal."

Telegrams, letters and telephone calls verified that WSB was being heard from Canada to the Panama Canal.

Not unexpectedly, the Journal ran many stories about its new station, initially eschewing all commercial interests. Even before the Federal Radio Commission issued its mandate for broadcasters to operate in the "public interest, convenience and necessity," WSB policy was that the "station will be operated purely for the benefit and enjoyment of the public."



A cartoon recalls WSB's first night on the air. Courtesy: www.wsbhistory.com

VARIETY RADIO FOR THE SOUTHEAST

True to its word, WSB made its microphones available to anyone who sought airtime. And sure enough, as all sorts of Georgians walked through the doors, WSB programs became examples of true variety. Listeners might tune in to enjoy all sorts of things: talks, musical instrumentalists, singing groups, even whistlers.

While there was ample evidence that WSB was being heard around the country, the station primarily wanted to serve the Atlanta area. Since radio receivers were selling for \$600-700 at the time, it was felt necessary to take steps to ensure the audience would be more than just the very rich.

For example, a truck equipped with a receiver and loud speakers was taken all around Atlanta and surrounding communities. Also, regular evening classes were set up to teach people how to build their own crystal receivers. After demonstrating how to construct the set, it was given to someone in the class.

Perhaps you may have heard the letters WSB stand for "Welcome South, Brother." While they originated as a random sequential call sign when issued, WSB ran a listeners' contest in 1922 to put a slogan to the call sign. "Welcome South, Brother" was chosen for its warm inviting sound, and it stuck over the years.

FROM 100 to 50,000 WATTS

As WSB's fame grew, Cohen and Tison apparently had a falling out, and Tison was dismissed. He would turn up in the Tampa Bay, Florida area and was responsible for constructing a large number of Tampa AM, FM and TV stations over the years, including WGHB and the first directional station in the US, WFLA-WSUN.

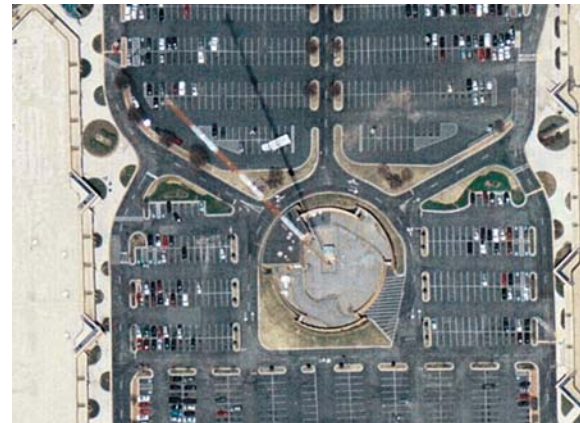
Meanwhile, WSB grew to 200 Watts, 1,000 Watts, 5,000 Watts, and in 1933 reached 50 kW. The station developed as a true voice of the South, moving several times from its original 833 kHz spot on the dial to finally land all by itself on the Clear Channel (I-A) of 750 kHz in 1941.

WSB moved physically, too. The power increases helped them reach more people, but also generated complaints of overpowering local listeners. The solution was to move away from the center of town. Due to the poor ground conductivity around Atlanta it was not necessary to move too far.

SURROUNDED!

This led to a different problem, affecting many stations in what used to be in rural areas: city growth caught up with the transmitter site. The value of the land was a large part of the station's value in the early 1980s, so owner Cox Communications sold off the surrounding land to a shopping center developer, with the proviso that the transmitter and antenna would remain in place.

Today, WSB is surrounded by the Northlake Tower Festival shopping center. With careful engineering, the station coverage was largely kept intact, while avoiding shocking the local shoppers.



Today, WSB sits in the middle of a shopping center parking lot.

Now 85 years old in 2007, the Southern Belle, WSB, continues serving the southeast from Atlanta, welcoming listeners to enjoy its southern hospitality. It kind of makes you thirsty for a Mint Julip! - Radio Guide -

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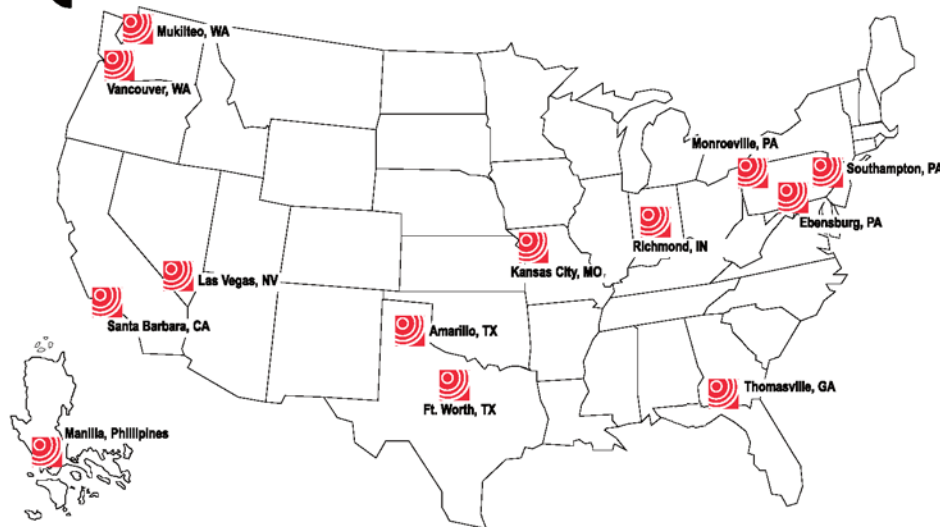
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