

ALABAMA HISTORICAL RADIO SOCIETY

A brief History of Radio Involving Birmingham

The people involved, in the early history and development of radio, in their wildest dreams never considered it to be anything but a communication media. So, all developmental work was considered in that light and in that direction.

The original electrical form of communication media was the telegraph, which handled all information by means of code. It could cover much distance because electro-mechanical relay/repeaters were practical. The telephone was another communication media but because a means of relay amplification did not exist, was rather restricted to local use.

If radio could overcome these problems, and it presented that possibility, rich financial rewards should be forthcoming. Transmitting and receiving equipment was very crude, especially in terms of modern standards. Transmitters were usually spark-gap and receivers depended on coherers, crystals or some similar devices.

On Dec. 12, 1901 Marconi, an English man of Italian extraction, made the first radio transmission and reception across the Atlantic ocean. In 1906 DeForrest patented the first three element vacuum tube, called the Audion. In 1912 Edwin Armstrong invented the regenerative vacuum tube detector, which was far superior to anything previously used.

Inspired by these and other less conspicuous achievements the United States became a nation of radio experimenters. Before World War I they began to be called amateurs and their numbers grew to several thousand. All civilian radio was shut down because of the war but because of these amateurs the armed services found a well trained supply of operators able and willing to serve.

The War ended in 1919 and civilian amateur operations resumed. On Nov. 2, 1920, Frank Conrad, an engineer with Westinghouse Electric Mfg. Co,

began the transmission of voice and music instead of dots and dashes from his radio shack in back of his house in Pittsburgh, PA.

The area reception to these broadcasts was so amazing that Westinghouse became interested and took over the project. It there-upon established KDKA and in a very short time manufactured thousands of small radio receivers. Within a year and a half radio stations KYW, Chicago; WJZ, Springfield; WGY, Schenectady; and WJZ, New York began operations. The radio boom was on and the American System of radio broadcasting was born.

We can't find anything in the national history records about it but in early 1920 a young Birmingham resident by the name of Tom (Charles Thomas) Brown, who was an ardent experimenter, converted his Code transmitter so as to broadcast sound. From old-timer interviews we have reason to believe he may have been in contact, code wise, with Frank Conrad and from him learned how to make the conversion.

At any rate, Brown sold his converted rig to a "Pop" Ainsley, who took out a regular commercial license. So in 1921 WKBC came on the scene with 10 watts of power and began irregular broadcasts of records and talk. WSY came on the air shortly after that and the radio boom was on in Alabama as well as the rest of the nation.

By 1925 there were three stations in Birmingham: WKBC; WSY; & WBRC. Also, a new receiver design had been developed by Ernest House.

The most common set with highest sales at this time was a three dial type of receiver which offered the greatest sensitivity as well as selectivity. This type of receiver was, however, difficult to tune so that most manufacturers of the time were opting for a single dial. Efforts in this direction were generally mechanical such as; connecting all three tuners with

belts; mounting them all on a single shaft; one manufacturer even went to a rack and pinion system.

However, the design invented by Mr. House was purely electrical and appeared so valuable that a patent was applied for and actually issued in Sept. of 1927. Probably for this reason he and two other men; W. T. Estes and Jek Cabiness established a Corporation to manufacture this receiver. Thus the Radio Products Corporation was formed. This was in April of 1925. By the end of the year a building had been constructed and operations commenced. The hard winter of 1925/1926 gave time to prepare the New "Superflex" Receiver for sales.

By 1927 WKBC had changed its call letters to WSBN; WAPI had moved back from Auburn to Birmingham; and WBRC had greatly expanded. All went well until Oct. 1929 when the market crash occurred and the great depression was on.

By 1932 business activity had become real tough. Advertising was much curtailed. There was no money for radio broadcasting, progress or improvement. Mr. House had to trade a radio set to a dentist to get his daughter's teeth fixed. Because of the depression and the advent of the superheterodyne circuit the Radio Products Corporation had to turn in its chips.

Business recovery was slow but by 1935 things took on a brighter turn. Radio was back in Birmingham and Alabama and a new but milder boom was on.

Don Charge 11-18-90