

A Brief History of Radio Involving Birmingham

By Don Kresge

November 18, 1990

The people involved in the early history and development of radio never dreamed it would 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 other similar devices.

On December 12, 1901, Marconi, an Englishman 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 Audron. 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 November 2, 1920, Frank Conrad, an engineer with Westinghouse Electric Manufacturing Company, began the transmission of voice and music instead of dots and dashes from his radio shack in back of his house in Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania.

The area reception to these broadcasts was so amazing, that Westinghouse became interested and took over the project. This established KOKA and in a very short time manufactured thousands of small radio receivers. Within a year and a half, radio stations KYW, Chicago; WBZ, 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" Hinsley, who took out a regular commercial license. So in 1921, WBKC 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; and WBRC. Also, a new receiver design had been developed by Earnest 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 September, 1927. Probably for this reason, he and two other men: W. T. Estes and Jelk 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 sale.

By 1927, WKBC had changed its call letters to WSGN; WAPI had moved back from Auburn to Birmingham; and WBRC had greatly expanded. All went well until October, 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 superhetrodyne 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.

For more information about the author or this document, please send email to the Alabama Historical Radio Society at ahrs@AlabamaHistoricalRadioSociety.org or visit our website at AlabamaHistoricalRadioSociety.org