

~~6/23/87~~ 6/23/87

WVTM-TV HISTORY

In 1922, radio stations in key areas began the era of ~~modern~~ modern electronic communications. In Birmingham, a small station, WSY began to broadcast under the auspices of the Alabama Power Company and Matthews Electric Company. At Auburn Alabama, an equally modest operation began ~~with~~ ^{with} the call letters WMV ("We Make a Voice").

In time, the Birmingham station's operators closed its service and gave its transmitter and other equipment to Alabama Polytechnic Institute's (API) for its WMAV operation.

By 1928, the cost of operating WMAV at Auburn became prohibitive and the Extension Service negotiated with the City of Birmingham and others to take over the station's operation and move it to Birmingham. This was done. The call letters were changed to WAPI. The ownership was held by Auburn, The University of Alabama and Alabama College (Montevallo). The operators of the station, which was non-commercial, found that ultimately the cost had to be borne by advertising.

The depression-ridden economy affected broadcasting in the Magic City as it did everything else.

Written
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NOBODY WAS
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BY 1987

PUT together
By WVTM

WMAV

In 1922 a radio station ~~that was established~~ signed on the air in Birmingham. Involved in its operation were the Alabama Power Company and the City of Birmingham. The cost proved to be too great, and the station ~~was~~ ^{Transmitter and equipment} given to Auburn University which assumed its operation. The correct name of the university ^{which} then was the Alabama Polytechnic Institute, thus ~~WAPI~~. In 1927, when the station returned to Birmingham, it retained the ~~call letters.~~

~~The first radio station in Alabama signed on the air~~ In 1922, ~~it~~ ^{became operational.} was WMAV at Auburn University. During the 1920's, station WSY operated in Birmingham under the auspices of Matthews Electric Company and the Alabama Power Company. Equipment from WSY went to Auburn and was used ~~as~~ ^{to} enable WMAV to transmit. THE BIRMINGHAM NEWS ~~was interested~~ ^{had an interest in} in WSY and were to ~~re-establish~~ re-establish their interest in broadcasting in later years.

The cost of operating the radio station at Auburn proved to be prohibitive, it was moved to Birmingham (the city bore part of the operating cost) in 1928. Ownership was held by Alabama Polytechnic Institute, The University of Alabama and Alabama College (Montevallo).

In 1936, Entrepreneur Ed Norton and ~~Advertising and~~ ^{promotion} professional ~~Thad Holt~~ ^{economically foundering} joined forces to form the Voice of Alabama, Inc. and take over the ~~depression hit~~ station. They convinced the Chairman of the Board and founder of CBS, William Paley to become a partner. Mr. Paley had CBS buy a 45% interest in the operation which it retained for a number of years.

During the World War II years, the station prospered and the principals, in their words, "bought nothing but war bonds" with their surplus. They anticipated the need for capital for FM and subsequently television expansion.

The FM came first. I-95 of today would hardly be recognized by its programming as the FM station ~~was~~ the Voice of Alabama put on the air. ~~at 1937~~

~~In 1947~~ ^{was} WAFM, Alabama's first FM station, ^{and} went on the air ⁱⁿ 1947. Since three educational institutions owned WAPI, the ~~owners~~ ^{operators} chartered the FM as a separate, non-state affiliated entity ^{which they owned. The separate call letters prevented confusion as to ownership.}

In 1949, when the television ~~&~~ station was constructed and began operation, ^{FM,} it operated as a property of the Voice of Alabama, Inc., and the call letters reflected that. Channel thirteen was WAFM-TV and was an affiliate of CBS and DuMont networks. /

From 1928 into the 1950's, the three-station operation was headquartered in the Protective Life Building (now the Commerce Center) at First Avenue and 20th Street. Protective Life, in exchange for station identification reference, provided facilities and in 1928 had built a French gothic auditorium and studio atop their building--and provided it with a three-manual Kimball theater organ. Radio programs and ^{ultimately,} the important weekend television shows ^{FM and TV} originated from that room until a television studio was added to the/transmission and film facilities located in Radio Park, atop ~~Red~~ Mountain.

~~Some time~~ WAPI, WBRC and WSGN stations agreed to buy and build Radio Park during World War II. The boundaries of that land remain intact and are occupied by WVTM-TV and WBRC-TV. Both WBRC and WAFM-TV began building television facilities and identical towers at the same time. The latter were self-supporting towers ~~of~~ over five hundred feet ~~high~~ ^{WAFM-TV's was built} high located on the crest of the mountain (over the present newsroom and operations entrance of Channel 13). Both planned to go on the air the 4th of July, 1949.

As noted earlier, Thad Holt ^{had ~~some~~ a gift for promotion,} ~~was a promoter~~ by profession and by reputation. He seized upon an opportunity to borrow the services of a travelling ABC remote unit passing through town to produced a live program in May, ^{of 1949.} Based on this chance production, televised among the ~~test~~ ^{test} pattern transmissions, the station claimed to have been ~~the~~ the first television station on the air in Alabama. ^{While it did go on the air July 4th,} ~~the~~ a more formal presentation ^{was staged} ~~occurred~~ in October ~~with~~ with television set distributors participating in a staged review which included a television fashion show. This time the station used its own

cameras (which had been bought used from ABC).

Live programming included a weekly country music program, HAPPY WILSON AND THE GOLDEN RIVER BOYS, a sports show CHALKTALKS WITH FRED SINGTON AND MAURY FARRELL, a gospel music program featuring WILLIE MCKINSTRY and STAN MAJLOTTE AT THE ORGAN.

A fifteen minute popular music program

In short order, a very small studio was constructed at the transmitter site. This allowed a 5:00PM daily news, sports and weather program. The first meteorologist on television in Alabama was Leroy Reeves ^{who} did the weather through 1952. The news was presented by one of the staff announcers, and the sports was done by Maury Farrell (the voice of the Alabama Crimson Tide). News analysis was offered by Dr. Leon Sensabaugh of Birmingham Southern College. Inisitally, the small studio was a part of the announce booth and could

accommodate ~~but~~ one camera. *Later a small piano was crowded in to aid in doing a three time weekly music program, "A BOY, A GIRL AND A SONG."*

The big weekly shows were done from the cathedral studio on the fourteenth floor of the Protective Life building. A remote ~~control~~ unit, housed in a 1948 Chevrolet-Flexible bus, was parked on the 21st Street overpass adjacent to the Protective Life building, and the camera cables were dropped from the top of the building to the street. Neither rain nor shine nor dark of night deterred the crews from their appointed rounds, but the lack of sufficient air conditioning in the studio and the bus often made everyone question their dedication to the new and glamorous medium.

In 1952 the first television studio was built atop Red Mountain. In 1962, it was encompassed ^{literally,} by the present studio. ~~was~~ In 1952, (October 9) the company ~~name~~ name was changed to The Television Corporation.

By that time the station had a rather full schedule and was doing daily programming from the studio and a late evening newscast at 11:00PM. The philosophy which prompted the late hour was that radio had "put the people to sleep after ~~at~~ at 10:15," and that television would not make the same mistake. Even in the late seventies, the station's late evening news was scheduled at 11:00PM.

In 1953, Storer Broadcasting bought WBRC television, WVTM's chief competitor. The Television Corporation owners, seeing that the CBS-Storer relation was strong, sold WAFM-TV, WAFM, and the operational control of WAPI to the Birmingham News Company, June 10th, ~~1953~~. Shortly thereafter, the station became affiliated with NBC. Although CBS had been lost, the station seized the promotional initiative with a "Who stole the ding dong!" campaign. NBC's signature was the sound of the famous chimes, heard at the conclusion of each network program. The public ^{believed} ~~thought~~ Thirteen had ^{brought forth} ~~brought forth~~ a real coup.

When the Birmingham News Company bought the stations, they had ^{their own} ~~a~~ radio operation, WSGN (The South's Greatest Newspaper) which was housed in the building west of and then unconnected to the present television ~~studio~~ transmitter and studio facility. WSGN, due to federal requirements, was sold (to Winsbn-Salem Broadcasting). The physical facilities were retained and became WAPI. There was a merging of personnel.

The ~~station's~~ television station call letters were changed from WAFM-TV to ~~W~~ WABT (Alabama's Best in Television) and the ~~closing~~ signature closing all local live shows, "This is Television Alabama," was dropped. The number of local programs continued to expand under new management. Historically, the station (as its radio predecessor had) enjoyed news prominence, covering election returns with/elaborate studio and location broadcasting and news stories with black and white movie or still photography. Radio announcers identified with news supplemented the generally younger television staff to give the station an image of news professionalism even in those early days.

~~On~~ On January 30, 1956, The Birmingham News Company's properties were bought by S. I Newhouse. The station which had been first on the air, first with live cameras, first with color (The CBS method allowed a race from Hialeah to be carried over the network cables), ^{in the early 50's} the first with local news and many other claims to fame went through a number of changes.

Among these was that in 19⁶¹, following the purchase of the AM station from Auburn, Alabama and Alabama College, all three operations, AM, FM and TV could carry the same call letters, thus Channel 13 became WAPI-TV.

~~In 1958, Storer Broadcasting sold WBRC-TV to Taft Broadcasting.~~

In 1962, the station returned to the CBS fold. Until 1969, CBS and ^{WAPI-TV}

NBC programming were carried, fifty-fifty. The tape delays and scheduling were a nightmare. The schedule, a programmer's dream, ^{presented an endless} ~~was~~ a public relations ~~problem~~ ^{problem}.

~~By late 1965~~ By ~~late 1965~~ late 1965, a third station (UHF) had signed on the air and was taking the network shows (such as TONIGHT) not carried by ~~WAPI~~

Channel Thirteen. By 1969, it was apparent that the situation was self-

defeating, and CBS, which had been returned with fanfare and promotional

celebrations, ^{seven years earlier} was dropped. With ABC's first rise to prominence in 1958,

WBRC had dropped CBS for what is their present affiliation. ^{That same year,} ~~Storer sold WBRC to Taft Broadcasting.~~

In 1962, the television studio, transmitter and other technical facilities, film and programming and production offices were totally rebuilt. From that point to the present, additions and changes have marked the physical plant. The promotion department with its reproduction facilities were relocated to the lower level of the main building, and the ever-expanding news department was housed in a structure which gradually filled the space between the two original structures.

The operation was marked by changes and growth of personnel and services experienced by the industry. Technical changes, an increase in tower height, a growth in production capability and news professionalism marked the period which followed. In the 1970's the station saw production emphases changed from commercial to program ^{MING} and most particularly, specials. The latter ranged from live televising of the Miss Alabama pageant to presentations of the Alabama Symphony Orchestra. They included ~~many~~ numbers of filmed hours and half hours covering special people, special events, unusual stories and unique locations. The station's production capabilities included the ability to do original orchestrations and to spend the needed time on a dramatic story to produce award-winning pieces. It was also a period when

the television stations' role as the prime producer of television commercials (and talent) began to change. Advertising agencies began to do more independent production and the early beginnings of television production houses ~~signal~~ were to be seen. Major firms would enjoy the prestige of television specials and would pay for them. Channel thirteen was in the forefront of this effort and gained prestige and increased *program* production expertise from it.

~~February~~

On March 27, 1980, the Times Mirror Company purchased the Newhouse ~~television stations~~ in Harrisburg, Syracuse, St. Louis and Birmingham. WAPI-TV became WVTM-TV. *A dramatic change* ~~The station~~ in Birmingham television began.

On November 28, 1980, WVTM-TV placed a new tall tower and revolutionary new antenna into operation. Signal parity ~~was~~ between the top two stations in the city was achieved for the first time. With the coming of the new year, in 1981, a massive face-lifting began. New graphics, new sets, new musical themes, strong and vigorous promotion was totally coordinated and the ~~the~~ overall effort announced to the market that WVTM-TV was a force to be reckoned with. Parity in viewer numbers and news dominance were produced immediately. NBC's rise to dominance in the years following further heightened WVTM-TV's performance.

In January, 1982, Jack E. Harrison, a twenty-five year veteran of Times Mirror's KDFW in Dallas, became the station's seventh general manager. Mr. Harrison held key positions at KDFW both as talent and in the administrative ranks, having served as promotion manager, traffic and continuity director, and program director prior to becoming a vice president of Times Mirror and assuming the management of WVTM-TV.

In the decade of the eighties, success marked WVTM-TV. In 1982, its news climb continued with monumental gains in audience. By the first quarter of 1983, the station's 10:00PM local news had won seven out of *eight* the preceding rating periods. By 1984, the station became dominant in all three evening newscasts in both rating services.

In the intervening years, the station's performance in terms of audience growth, promotion innovation and public service ~~for~~ have marked it with distinction and have rewarded it with audience acceptance on a level it had aspired to achieve throughout its years of operation.