

YOUNGSTOWN STATE UNIVERSITY

ORAL HISTORY PROGRAM

Radio Broadcasting Project

WKBN Radio Broadcasting Experience

O. H. 351

WARREN WILLIAMSON

Interviewed

by

James Manross

on

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INTERVIEWEE: WARREN WILLIAMSON

INTERVIEWER: James Manross

SUBJECT: Radio Broadcasting Experience, Programming,
Equipment, Wattage

DATE: December 10, 1975

M: This is James Manross for the Oral History Program at Youngstown State University. The date is December 10, 1975. Today we're interviewing Mr. Warren P. Williamson Jr., founder and president of WKBN Broadcasting Corporation.

Mr. Williamson, are you originally from the Youngstown area?

W: Yes. I am from the Youngstown area; my family has been in the Youngstown area since 1800.

M: What prompted you to go into the radio business?

W: That's a long story, but I'll try to give you as much of the history at this point. During World War I, I was a radio operator in the signal corps U.S. Army. Subsequent to this I returned home and was married to Isabel DeNio. It's a long story to the point of when WKBN got started, but to brief it as much as possible I associated myself with a man by the name of Creed Chorpenning shortly after I was married. At this time radio was in its earliest stages and we organized a company to provide radio service. We were servicing radio sets of people around the town who at this time had the first of the vacuum tube receivers. This was just subsequent to the time when people used Galena detectors for receiving radio broadcasts. When I say radio broadcasts now this was before the day of television and in the very earliest days of broadcasting as we knew it in those times. In the course of the years in radio service business we wanted to publicize our business

endeavor and at one point I said to Creed Chorpenning who was then my associate in this service business, "Why don't we go in to the business of broadcasting and people will think if we're capable of running a broadcasting station that we certainly ought to be capable of repairing their radio receivers in their homes." This led to my application for a license to operate a broadcasting station. We went on the air after converting my amateur radio wireless station for broadcasting purposes. We went on the air in the latter part of August or the early part of September in 1926. It was seven and a half watts of power and the transmitter was located in my residence in a sewing room on the second floor and over the back porch. As I say, it was seven and a half watts of power and in late August or the early part of September, 1926, we tested it on the air and then formally put it on the air on September 26, 1926.

The first broadcasts were from the living room of my home at 26 Auburndale Avenue. Many of these broadcasts were Edison phonograph records or Victor records, which were available at that time. Gene Murphy, who used to be with the Youngstown Police Department, was quite a good vocalist and he entertained with his singing. Walter Lee Kauffman, who then lived in Youngstown, was the announcer at the time. We pursued the idea of publicizing our radio repair service. Subsequent to this and following the initial broadcast of September 26, 1926, on election day in 1926 we broadcasted the election returns from the living room of my home, 26 Auburndale Avenue, sponsored by the Youngstown Vindicator. At this time the Vindicator gave us the election returns by telephone from their downtown office. We received these on a phone that was located in the bathroom of my home upstairs. Then we carried the returns down to the living room and broadcasted them. This was one of the first major broadcasts we had, other than Youngstown's first radio show and the Rayen-South football game that year.

In November of that year we moved the transmitter, which was then still seven and a half watts of power and could be easily moved, to the second floor of Rayen School where Chorpenning and I installed it temporarily, and we broadcast direct from the sidelines of the football field as the game was being played at Rayen Stadium on Thanksgiving Day, 1926.

The other broadcast of any importance other than the usual phonograph records we would play was the first annual radio show, which at that time was held in the Fitch Garage at the corner of Wick Avenue and Commerce

Street. This radio show was on the second floor of this new building and the show was sponsored by Youngstown's radio dealers and promoted by Arthur Brock, who then had a radio store on Phelps Street near the old Ritter-Myer Company store, or on the floor below the Ritter-Myer Company. This broadcast covered a number of evenings and there was a bandstand on the second floor built for the purpose, on which a local orchestra performed. We broadcast the music of the orchestra and displayed our radio and transmitter equipment down there. The transmitter was the small, seven and half watt transmitter that we had used previously with power increased to 50 watts. We moved it down there as a temporary affair of course. We had one idea and that was that we increase the power to 50 watts. In those days, as far as we were concerned, there wasn't too much money in the bank account and changing the transmitter to 50 watts was a considerable endeavor on our part. In those days we didn't work for money, we worked because it was a hobby and for the love of it all. This is the story of the beginning of WKBN.

At this point, just subsequent to that, we moved this small transmitter to the Central YMCA building, which was then under the operation of General Secretary Leonard T. Skeggs. Mr. Skeggs felt that his morning altar service and the setting up exercises of his athletic department should be broadcast for the benefit of Youngstown people. He also felt that it would be nice for the YMCA to have a broadcast station that might broadcast the meetings of the Lions Club or other meetings that might be held in the YMCA as this seemed to be the one central point where most activities took place in Youngstown in those early days. On Mr. Skeggs invitation we moved the transmitter to the YMCA and installed it on the third floor in a front room which Mr. Skeggs was willing to devote for the purpose of broadcasting. We were to render service to the "Y" in return for the rent of the space. As I said previously, in those days we had no money, we worked for love, and for years we ran the operation, which survived primarily because Creed Chorpensing, who was my associate in the repair business, and myself, were willing to work without compensation. So it was a matter of getting up in the morning and being there at 7:30 a.m., and putting on the altar service and the setting up exercises which were announced by various members of the YMCA. I think the federated churches were responsible for the broadcast of the altar service.

M: At this time did you have any news broadcasts?

W: In those days a situation with news was completely different than it is today. There were two primary news services in the days of 1926. The Youngstown newspapers had both of them. We did put on some news, but not as you know it today. The first news we had was given to us by the Youngstown Telegram. The Telegram used to bring a copy from its teletype, new bulletins to us in the YMCA in the morning. I think it was 8:00 a.m. if I recall, that we had the news. We read the copy that was given to us from the Telegram and the Telegram was compensated by the publicity that we gave it, as a supplier of the news.

Later, of course, news developed as broadcasting developed and other new services came into the field. Eventually, we joined the Columbia network, that is the CBS network as you know it today. It was a radio network then which still exists. We got news from them and also news from the Youngstown Telegram.

Later as it developed we took on news ourself from the United Press. News as we know it today, in those days, was quite different than it is at this particular time.

M: How long were you on the air a day?

W: During our programming we tried to occupy as much time as possible. We would be on the air for a few hours in the morning. We had to share time with a station in Columbus, Ohio and the result of it was that we were not a full-time operation. This is a long, long story and more than I could recite at this point. We were on the air in the early days now and then and when it was convenient, usually in the morning for the YMCA and then at the dinner hour for the people at home. We did play phonograph records and frequently we had piano music by various people. I recall in those days often times I would run around the corner to the music store and get the girl who played the piano for the popular music at the music store, to come over to the station and give us some programming in a piano recital of some sort. Our programming then had to do with interviewing the people, phonograph records, and perhaps piano or local orchestras or meetings.

- M: What was the initial public reaction?
- W: Public reaction in the early days was very good. Everybody thought that Youngstown ought to have a broadcasting station. We were the first to go on the air in September of 1926. Later, in 1927, another station came into being, which was owned, I think, by the Yaw Battery Company. Harry Warner, who was in the music business at the time, was interested with others. Their operation failed however, and they ceased to do business after several months. We then went on with our programming and again I say if it hadn't been for the YMCA in those days who provided the light and heat and a place to do business, and if it wasn't for the fact that we were willing to work for love, so to speak, in the development of this business, we would not have survived ourselves.
- M: With the small transmitter how far did that cover?
- W: Seven and a half watts of power in those days gave coverage to the immediate Youngstown area. I would say that it probably was limited to ten or twenty miles at the most.
- M: Were there many other radio stations in Ohio at this time?
- W: Oh, yes, there were other stations, primarily in Cleveland, Akron, Columbus, and other major cities. The major markets had stations and the smaller markets didn't have.
- M: Could the people around here get Cleveland and Columbus at that time?
- W: Oh yes, they had good reception in the early days until many stations got on the air and we were one of them who got into the business of broadcasting as it developed. In those days, there became a serious heterodyne problem of interference because stations did not maintain their frequencies. Radio reception in those days was subject to whistles and howls and heterodyne interference.
- M: Where did you eventually make the transmitter a permanent fixture?
- W: We were permanent in the YMCA for a number of years. I'm not prepared now to tell you how many that was because I don't recall. We moved our studios from

the YMCA a number of years ago to the location where we are now. We moved our transmitter to this point in the early days, and subsequently built additional building and property to accommodate our business enterprise. Our home for many years was in the YMCA. We first had one room and then we took over another room as a reception room and then we occupied another couple of rooms which became studios. The space became available as the YMCA Business School was moving to Youngstown College at this time. We had a number of rooms on the third floor eventually and conducted our business enterprise there, which we had to cease because the YMCA was an eleemosynary institution and we were a commercial enterprise; a commercial enterprise didn't belong in that kind of an institution. That was the reason we moved from the YMCA and became an entity of our own on our own property on Sunset Boulevard where we are located today.

Radio, of course, developed in the course of the time. We had the CBS network. We later added, with the development of time, FM broadcasting (frequency modulation) with our radio. This went through the stages of development and expansion as did the radio operation which was on 570 kc. where it is today. Subsequent to this in the course of time in the development of the industry we went into television which we have pioneered as we did radio and FM in our community. As a matter of fact, we're--I think--one of the first FM Broadcasters in the state, but I guess I better not claim that.

M: When you were running the radio station in the 1930's and 1940's, did you ever envision the media like television is developing?

W: People don't seem to understand how these things come about. To my recollection radio broadcasting came about because of the developments that were made in the latter days of World War I. As you can understand when you're in a war, government spends money for the development of things and much more so than private enterprise could put together, so that you have laboratory developments that take maybe a generation, for the public to absorb. Broadcasting came out of World War I and I believe the first transmission of voice here may have been our own. There may have been experimental work earlier than that, but I believe this is true. There were pioneers in the broadcasting business; KDKA was one of the earlier pioneers. There was some question that WWJ of Detroit may have been a day or so earlier, but at least KDKA seems to be given the credit for the pioneer in the broadcasting field. Networks developed because of the need for

programming internationally and otherwise, and the need for news, and the public acceptance of it all. Out of this and the development of FM broadcasting, which took many years for frequency modulation to develop, there were many things that the industry had to develop in order to make it an acceptable broadcast media. Frequency modulation today is probably one of the most acceptable mediums with the quality of programming that it provides, even more so than what we might today call AM radio or the old broadcast radio.

Coming into World War II we came in to the next development and here again government spent endless funds in laboratory development. Out of this came television and since that time we have had the development of television in monochrome or black and white. In the most recent years, it has been a development of color television. Certainly there is further development to be made and perfection of equipment to be done. One of the difficulties for an operator is to be able to maintain modern equipment which antiquates itself in very short periods. Perhaps we might buy a piece of equipment that is antiquated in the course of a few months so that you are forever changing, rebuilding and improving. There seems to be no end to it. Where it stops your guess is as good as mine.

M: In the late 1930's and 1940's was the programming basically records or more network shows?

W: Now you're asking me about the 1930's and 1940's and I'm going back to radio. In those days for our local programming, we had about sixty percent from Columbia network, the CBS network, which would have been network programming, and about forty percent of it had to do with local programming, which had to do with broadcasts of orchestras, meetings, records, interviews, piano recitals, or various things of that nature. It is hard for me to spell out the particular kinds of programming that we had, but those would be the fields of programming that we used.

Walter Lee Kauffman was the first announcer we ever had other than the announcing that went on at the time that we were developing the station, which was just miscellaneous announcing by myself and Mr. Chorpenning.

W: We have some of our earliest people still with us. Lothaire Bowden was our station manager and was the announcer back in the early days. Lothaire was a teacher at Princeton School and he gave up his

teaching profession to join WKBN at the time as the station announcer. Don Gardner, who is currently with us, was also a Latin teacher, I believe, at Princeton School. He has been our sports director over the years and is still with us. Lothaire Bowden, of course, was deceased a number of years ago. I'm afraid I don't recall too many of the old-timers unless it would be my secretary Ruth Cruihshank who is still here. I would have to research that back there. In September of this year we will have been fifty years in the business. My memory going back fifty years is pretty poor.

- M: It's amazing how this station has stood strong all those years. Have you basically been very much satisfied with your fifty years of providing public service?
- W: I've been a very fortunate man in the sense that what was a hobby of a boy in his early lifetime, which was wireless, goes back to about 1912 when I dabbled in wireless communication, and then became an amateur in the years before World War I and had to disband my amateur wireless hobby because of the war and orders of the federal government. It has been a very satisfying thing to me to grow up with an industry at the same time that the industry was developing so that a young man's hobby became a business venture and has grown and developed as the industry and the business of broadcasting has been perfected.
- M: Would a radio station that tries to become a radio station today, starting from scratch, be faced with the same obstacles as you faced?
- W: Obstacles, what do we mean when we say obstacle? If you wanted to go in to the broadcasting business today you would have to go to the FCC, Federal Communications Commission, and ask for a license. Most of the frequencies that are used for broadcasting have already been occupied by other people and unfortunately there is a limitation to the frequencies that can be used for broadcasting. They are already assigned by the Federal Communications Commission. In the early days we went into the business in substance before the FCC became an entity in federal government. At the time we went into it, as I recall, the Commerce Department was the department of government that controlled broadcasting stations. In those days getting a license was a very simple thing, an application to government and it was issued. Today it wouldn't be as simple as

that. Of course, we have occupied what we were able to get at that time and have developed it. With the development of frequency modulation and of television broadcasting, we have pioneered in this field in our community and pioneering means that we got in in the early days when these facilities were available and they're not available anymore.

M: Looking back on WKBN's history with some hindsight, is there anything you would have done differently? I mean as far as the station is concerned.

W: Yes, there are a lot of things. As I look back over the years there are many things that we could have done in the early days that would have saved us a lot of problems in the course of events. One particular thing I'm thinking of is the fact that WKBN in its early days operated on a 570 kilocycle frequency and we operated two-thirds of the time here in Youngstown on a very odd schedule of time on the air. The other one-third of the time was in Columbus, Ohio operated by Ohio State University. We had problems in maintaining listeners because of the on-the-air, off-the-air schedule of affairs that we had. As I recall, it took me fifteen years to solve the problem of the divided time that we had been assigned. This only came about by many hearings before the FCC, and the support of the community who was behind us. We were able to eventually solve the problem of the divided time operation to where WKBN became a full-time station. Had we known earlier in the business, we might well have had the full-time operation without all of the years of trial and effort before the FCC. That is the outstanding thing that I can think of here. In the early days, we had divided time operation. When we went to the FCC after they had been departmentalized by the federal government, we went to them and asked for a full-time station. As a matter of fact, we referred to WMBW, which was then a station that had ceased broadcasting in Youngstown and we went to the commission and said, "Now, here's the license for this station, but we would like to have a full-time station in Youngstown and we'll turn this license back to you and you can give it to somebody else somewhere, if you give us full-time." The commission didn't do what we had hoped that they would do and it was only after the fifteen years of trial before the commission and our efforts and the efforts of the public in support of us that we were able to get WKBN a full-time assignment in Youngstown. WKBN is fortunate in the fact that it has a frequency that is a very efficient frequency for the transmission of sound. It operates on a regional channel rather than a local channel. We

felt that if we were going to bring something to Youngstown as we tried, it should be more than a local channel assignment. We wanted a regional channel and felt that Youngstown was justified in expecting that sort of thing and this is what we pursued and eventually were able to get.

M: One last question sir, is there any one particular thing that you are most proud of that you have accomplished?

W: I don't think that there is anything particularly outstanding that we have. We think that we have a staff of people here who are as alert and interested as any station has. We are proud of the fact that we have pioneered in radio in the early days with its development. We're proud of the fact that we pioneered in FM broadcasting, which is now what we call stereo 99. We're proud of the fact that we again pioneered and were the first station in television in Youngstown. These are pioneering things that come about because of the fact that we are in the business of broadcasting for the love of broadcasting. I guess that's the thing I think of at the moment at least. If I researched it, I might find other things.

M: Thank you very much, sir. It has been a pleasure talking to you. Good luck in all your endeavors.

W: Thank you very much and good luck to you.

END OF INTERVIEW