

WADC's First Ten Years

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Chapter I - "Spreading Seed"

It is peculiarly appropriate that radio takes its name from one of the oldest activities of man - spreading seed upon the ground. Radio's seed - which we might conjecture to be a tube-shaped affair - has proved to be a fast-growing, wide-spreading variety. It would be more difficult to stamp out than that of the pesky milkweed, and in its present-day developed form is held in approximately the same esteem by some. That, however, is not our concern here. We are concerned with the first ten years of station WADC's development. First, we shall need a bit of general background, so let's look into our mirror, and trust that we'll have better luck than the Lady of Shalott.

It was in 1915 that engineers of the Bell system first transmitted, under favorable conditions, spoken words by radio telephone from Washington, D.C., to Paris, France; to Darien, Panama; and to Honolulu, Hawaii.

It has been said that "the spoken word is humanity on the march - history in the making."

Sarnoff, David, Radio, Encyclopedia Americana, 1934

Radio, in 1915, perhaps feeling itself late starting in the "march", took up a pace which could only lead to peptic ulcers, were radio a human being.

There is no clean line of demarcation beyond which radiotelephony branched away from point-to-point use and pointed toward the new field of a mass communication service. Radio "hams" with their sets appeared all over the country in the years between 1915 and 1920, and broadcasting as we know it began in 1920. The formal birthday of broadcasting as an institution was November 2nd, 1920. In the evening, station KDKA, located in East Pittsburgh, carried the returns of the Harding-Cox presidential election. KDKA had been formerly an experimental transmitter of the Westinghouse Electric and Manufacturing Company.

The first seven years of radio were exciting and hectic. Not until 1927 did Congress pass the Radio Act, which called for allocation of wave-lengths, the most important of three important stipulations. NBC was not organized until 1926, with CBS following close behind in 1927. Stations were independent, and the entire band of wavelengths was without restriction. By 1922 there were nearly four hundred transmitters on the air, and in 1927 there were over seven hundred. Articles were published with such titles as "Is Radio Only a Passing Fad?",

Literary Digest, June 3, 1922, 31-32

"Pity the Poor Radio Artists, Who Can't Collect",

Literary Digest, June 14, 1924, 46

"Does Radio Rob the Songwriter?",

Literary Digest, May 3, 1924, 30-31

and "Radio Squatters",

Independent, Oct. 2, 1926, 389-390

which show some of the thoughts of the period. But it was during these years that the basic character of the American system of broadcasting gradually took shape.

Chapter II - "Fertile Ground"

The dawn of 1925 found the Akron automobile dealers preparing for their annual automobile show, to be held in April. The idea of broadcasting the show was conceived by someone, and the association set to work to get the 1925 Akron Auto Show "on the air". The condition of radio in Akron at that time might best be described as "feeble". There had been an amateur outlet, 8UX, operated at his home, 50 South Balch Street, and owned by Mr. Donald A. Hoffman, in early 1920. 8UX, however, went out of existence with the formation of Akron's pioneer commercial station, WOE, which was located on South Main Street, opposite the B.F. Goodrich Company. This powerful five-watt voice of Akron was operated part-time by Mr. Ed Gammeter, who had just previous to the founding of WOE, started the Buckeye Radio Store.

Because of the condition, or lack of same, of radio in Akron in 1925, the Auto Dealers Association secured a temporary license to broadcast from the show room. The call letters WADC and a power of five watts were assigned to the temporary station, Mr. Jack Gritton became locally famous as WADC's first announcer, and the Auto Show of 1925 went down in Akron history as a resounding success. All Akron thronged to the show to watch this new wonder, Radio, in action.

A West Virginia farm boy, turned rubber worker, turned proprietor of the Allen Theater on South Main Street, seeing this interest in radio, purchased the equipment, increased the power to a booming -by comparison- one hundred watts, secured a permanent license, and moved into the Portage Hotel. Mr. Allen T. Simmons had entered the radio broadcasting business.

Chapter III - "Where There's Life"

On Sunday, Monday, and Tuesday nights, April 5th, 6th, and 7th, WADC, whose slogan was to be "Watch Akron Develop Commerce", broadcast test programs, and on April 8th, 1925, at 7:00 pm, Allen T. Simmons formally opened his new radio station, on a wavelength of 258 meters. Here is the program of that first broadcast, as announced beforehand by Mr. Jack Gritton, station manager and announcer.

Akron Beacon Journal, April 8, 1925, 1

We shall notice the lack of the split-second timing of today:

1. Inaugural speech by President Simmons.
2. "Several" numbers by the Carnes-Richards Hotel Portage orchestra.
3. Dedication of the station to its use in broadcasting local talent and advertising the city of Akron and its product, by Mayor D.C. Rybolt.
4. Speeches by the following outstanding men - Mr. Vincent L. Stevens, secretary of the Chamber of Commerce; Mr. C.L. Knight, publisher of the Akron Beacon Journal; Mr. E.F. Haupt, manager of the Portage Hotel; Mr. "Ike" Friedman of the Theater Owners Association; and Mr. L.E. Judd, editor of the Akron Times-Press.
5. Music until 8:00 pm by the Carnes-Richards Hotel Portage orchestra.
6. "His Lullaby" by Bond, and "Banjo Song" by Horner; sung by Mrs. Miriam Ward, contralto. "Rose Marie" by Friml, and "I Love You More" by Lee; by Mr. Clifford Wilson, tenor. "Cheaten on Me" and "Saint Louis Blues"; characterized by Miss Dale Dyer, eccentric singer. "At Dawning" by Cadman, and "Dream" by Barret; by Mrs. Lois Krumroy. Roy Wilhelm, eccentric singer, and Fred McKee, tenor, had "not yet announced their numbers." "A Little Voice I Hear" from the Barber of Seville, and "The Last Rose of Summer"; by Miss Lucille Sheehy. Miss Dyer again with "Alone" and "Easy Goin' Mamma".
7. Thirty-minute concert by the orchestra to close the program.

The next day's edition of the paper reported the program a success.

Akron Beacon Journal, April 9, 1925, 22

The Hotel Fort Worth in Fort Worth, Texas, called at 8:25 pm and reported they were receiving the program. The first official broadcasting by station WADC was done by the Carnes-Richards Hotel Portage orchestra, which played "Queen of Autumn" by Biggs, and "Indian Dawn" by Zamecnik. Mrs. Miriam Ward was the first person to sing over WADC. Another evidence of the lack of the precision in timing and programming of radio in 1925 is found in the closing sentence of the article - "The rest of the program followed generally the schedule announced."

Akron's brand new station was located, to be exact, in room 509 of the Portage Hotel. This room was divided into "a reception room and a performance studio".

Akron Beacon Journal, April 8, 1925, 1

The original equipment consisted of a microphone, a piano, and "a system of signal lights, one red and one green, signalling that broadcasting is or is not taking place."

Akron Beacon Journal, April 8, 1925, 1

WADC promised its listeners nightly entertainment. The first regular program began immediately and was furnished by the Carnes-Richards Hotel Portage orchestra, which played nightly - almost, at least - from the dining room of the Portage Hotel.

Chapter IV - "-From Little Acorns-"

"Mighty oaks from little acorns grow." All Akronites are familiar with the "mighty oak" at the corner of Mill and Main Streets in downtown Akron, the new and modern home of "WADC - First in Akron". We're all familiar with the above phrase, too. We're ready now to look back at some of the "little acorn" days and have a glance at some of the highlights in WADC's development up to its "moving day", February 13th, 1935, when the main studios and offices were moved to Tallmadge, Ohio.

Akron Beacon Journal, Feb. 14, 1935, 16

WADC as we know it today, is found at 1350 kilocycles on the dial and has a power of 5000 watts. We know that at its inauguration it was at 258 meters on the dial and had a power of 100 watts. The station has been located since at 1260 kilocycles, 1320 kilocycles, and now at 1350 kilocycles on the dial; and power has been increased in easy stages from 100 to 250 to 500 to 1000 to 2500 to 5000 watts. Studios have been located successively in the Portage Hotel; the Cadillac Building; at Tallmadge, Ohio; in the old Beacon Journal Building; and now at the corner of Main and Mill Streets here in Akron.

At first WADC was on the air only in the evening, as were many stations at that stage of development. The Carnes-Richards Hotel Portage orchestra, an amateur hour, and a children's show called "Kiddies' Cabaret" were the big things on the air. Time on the air was gradually increased, though according to Mr. Fred Bock, one of the longest-time members of the staff, it was not until the mid-thirties that the station opened before 9:00 am. As Mr. Bock put it, "Up to then, we were sure no one would listen to the radio before 9:00 o'clock." WADC's affiliation with the Columbia Broadcasting System when it was founded in 1927, helped increase the station's time on the air. CBS was carried two hours a night on Tuesday, Thursday, and Sunday, at first. This grew to two hours every night, and next an afternoon show was added. An interesting fact to note in passing is that the first network program carried by WADC was an hour NBC show in 1926, the name and date of which unfortunately, appears to be lost.

An early microphone is a curious sight to behold. It is a carbon affair, the mechanical details of which we will not go into here, with a large metal ring some eight inches in diameter

surrounding the actual diaphragm, which is approximately two inches in diameter. An announcer, before speaking, gave the outside ring two or three solid whacks with the heel of his hand, to shake loose the particles of carbon. Otherwise, the microphone would distort the sound - we would describe the distortion as "cracking". Announcers became left or right-handed at the microphone, as they did not speak directly into it, but "across" it - that is, at right angles to a line aimed directly at the "mike".

A typical 1925 schedule reads as follows:

6:30 pm - Hotel Portage Quintet
 7:00 pm - Antonio and the knights of the radio
 9:00 pm - Studio program
 10:00 pm - Times-Press hour"

Akron Beacon Journal, Dec. 1, 1925, 30

There was no such thing as a programming department, and no record of these early programs has been preserved. They were for the most part musical in content.

On Tuesday, December 1st, 1925, WADC put a musical program on the air from 1:00 to 3:30 am for the first time. The night was ideal for a distance test, and phone calls were received from Duluth, Minnesota; New Jersey; West Virginia; Kentucky; and Tennessee. Akron listeners requested such a program at least once a week.

The Carnes-Richards orchestra was popular from the beginning with Akron listeners, as shown by this note from the radio page for April 15th, 1925:

" 'Midsummer Night's Dream' showed the true skill of the Carnes-Richards Hotel Portage orchestra as they played it on the dinner concert from WADC, the Allen theater broadcasting station."

Akron Beacon Journal, April 15, 1925, 20

WADC was not on the air every night until its affiliation with CBS, and programming, such as it was, varied from night to night. This latter fact may be observed in the schedules for three nights in May, 1926:

Monday, May 3rd:

"6:30 pm - Hotel Portage Quintet
1:00 am (Tuesday) - India Owls"

Akron Beacon Journal, May 3, 1926, 16

Tuesday, May 4th:

"8:00 pm - Studio program
9:00 pm - Dance orchestra"

ABJ, May 4, 1926, 26

Wednesday, May 12th:

"6:30 pm - Dinner concert, West High School band
7:00 pm - Ball scores
9:00 pm - Carnes-Richards Roweland dance orchestra"

ABJ, May 12, 1926, 26

WADC's development seems to have continued gradual and without incident through the rest of the twenties. In January of 1927, the station joined with other stations throughout the country in celebrating the two hundred twenty first birthday of Benjamin Franklin.

In June of 1927, we find the first evidence of any regular, at least, morning program from WADC. The schedule for Wednesday, June 1st, gives an "Organ recital from the Allen theater" at 11:00 am.

ABJ, June 1, 1927, 19

The same schedule also carries a special musical program, which is referred to as a "Program under supervision of John Stein". This one was scheduled for 9:45 pm.

There were, of course, listener complaints then as now. In January of 1928, several listeners complained in letters to the radio editor of the Beacon Journal of interference between WADC and the other Akron station at that time, WFJC. One listener accused WADC of deliberately spreading to force WFJC off the air. However, later the same month, the radio page carried an article stating that it had been discovered that outside stations were interfering with both WADC and WFJC, and that the two were not interfering with each other.

On October 12th, 1929, the Federal Radio Commission authorized WADC to move to Tallmadge, Ohio, and the station was moved early in November of that year.

ABJ, Oct. 12, 1929, 1

WADC's regular sign-on time for 1930 was 9:00 am. The station signed on the air at 10:00 am on New Year's Day, carried the East-West all-star football game at 4:30 that afternoon, and signed off at midnight - quite a large day! This was quite a large year for WADC and Mister Allen T. Simmons.

Paul Whiteman and the Old Gold Orchestra celebrated their first anniversary on the air over CBS and WADC on February 4th, 1930.

A pamphlet in the Akron Public Library's Radio Broadcasting file states that Rev. George W. Knepper of the High Street Church of Christ boasted in 1930, after three years on the air, an audience of possibly one million and had received mail from as far away as Peru.

CBS was definitely a growing concern and was offering so many programs that in August of 1930, WADC cut its hour-long variety show to only fifteen minutes.

During the year 1930, WADC became a full-time, all-day-and-evening station.

On Tuesday, January 6th, 1931, the radio page carried this note:

"The first broadcast of a new musical instrument, called 'L'instrument d'Ondes Musicales', by its inventor, Maurice Martenot, is listed for a feature of the Symphony Concert via WADC and Columbia Tuesday at 9:30 pm."

ABJ, Jan. 6, 1931, 8

At 10:30 the same evening, "a cycle of songs" by Richard Rodgers, "composer of A Connecticut Yankee and Present Arms" was broadcast.

On Monday, January 12th of the same year, the leasing of the former quarters of station WFJC in the Beacon Journal

Building was reported by WADC. The rooms were to be used for a new studio, reception room, and new offices. The studios and quarters at Tallmadge were reported to be being kept. This was merely an expansion move. The staff was to be increased accordingly. The article went on to say that "Smoothness of program presentation is often hampered by the necessity of keeping two groups in one studio - a difficulty which has faced WADC program directors in their present quarters."

ABJ, Jan. 12, 1931, 20

These new quarters downtown made WADC's operation much more smooth. Particularly, it aided broadcasters from the city in that they were not required to go to Tallmadge, but could use the downtown studios.

In June of the same year, WADC was one of nine Ohio stations placed on the Federal Communications Commission honor roll for keeping their frequencies "within fifty cycles of their assigned channels" - quite a range of freedom!

ABJ, July 26, 1931, 25

Sign-on time in 1932 was 8:45 - the first it had been earlier than 9:00 am, of which Mr. Bock spoke in an earlier chapter.

Monday, February 29th, brought another note of criticism from a disgruntled listener. He criticized the station for not using local talent. He wrote, "All one hears are phonograph records."

ABJ, Feb. 29, 1932, 4

Ted Weems, who was on tour, broadcast from WADC on Sunday, June 26th, 1932.

The radio industry came under the NRA in November of 1933. The Beacon Journal wrote it up this way:

"The broadcasting industry has come into the NRA fold and the code contains a number of trade practice provisions with teeth."

ABJ, Nov. 15, 1933, 10

WADC was pro-NRA, and had demonstrated this in August of 1933. The station barred Mr. Bill Denton, superintendent of the Gospel Tabernacle, from the air on August 31st, because his proposed address outlined his reasons for opposing NRA. The local newspaper stated that Mr. "Marshal ((secretary of WADC)) explained that the station was 100% for NRA and would not sanction use of its facilities for any attack upon the national recovery program."

ABJ, Aug. 31, 1933, 14

The next step of any importance in WADC's growth was the installation of a second wire into the Mayflower Hotel. The station had one wire leading into the hotel for special events, and the new one would permit WADC to pick up Denny Thompson's orchestra starting "the middle of next week" - the 26th of September, 1934.

ABJ, Sept. 21, 1934, 18

The same radio page carried WADC's promise of more local programs for the winter.

At the date of the end of our history, WADC was at 1320 on the dial and had a daytime power of 2500 watts and an evening power of 1000 watts. Wednesday's paper, February 6th, 1935, states that:

"The FCC, Wednesday, granted permission to Allen T. Simmons, owner and operator of radio station WADC, to increase the daytime power of the station from one kilowatt to two and one-half kilowatts. This increase in power, used until 6:00 pm daily, extends the area over which WADC programs may be heard."

ABJ, Feb. 6, 1935, 21

The station was on the air until midnight, as usual, but had only 1000 watts power after 6:00 o'clock.

"Yesterday was moving day for WADC." - so read Thursday's Akron Beacon Journal, February 14th, 1935. New quarters had been prepared in Tallmadge and the staff was leaving some of its quarters in the Beacon Journal Building for the new ones at Tallmadge.

"Allen T. Simmons, owner, is continuing to maintain his studio and reception room in the Beacon Journal Building. But Bob Wilson, Frankie Renner, Fred Bock, and some of the rest of the familiar faces will take up their duties at Tallmadge."

ABJ, Feb. 14, 1935, 16

The article went on to say that the plan was to redecorate and refurnish "the town studio" and keep it "for speech broadcasts and the like."

And so, with WADC safely tucked away in its new home at Tallmadge, its last before changing again to a "City Mouse", we leave the first ten years of its history, except for the topic of -----

Chapter V - "Fun Along the Way"

The great comedian's - Charlie Chaplin's - first broadcast was evidently nothing short of hilarious. The event took place over station WOR, Newark, New Jersey. The first problem was to get Chaplin on the air at all. He refused to personally exploit himself for publicity. He was finally persuaded to broadcast when an idea proposed to him struck his fancy. He was to announce first that he would like to play a piano solo. The studio orchestra pianist would promptly play a brief melody. Chaplin would then announce that he would next play a violin solo, and the violinist would play a few bars. The same procedure was to be followed with the trumpet and a half dozen instruments. At the end of the final solo, Chaplin was to say that it had been such a pleasure to play the instruments one at a time for his audience that he would now like to play them all at once! - at which time the orchestra would begin playing. Chaplin was genuinely and extremely nervous before the broadcast and paced up and down, going over and over the few lines he had to say and shaking his fist jokingly at the microphone. The broadcast went as scheduled and rehearsed, except that Chaplin made the following remark, which was heard by all his listeners, after he had spoken his last line - "Whew! I'll bet I've lost nine pounds in fifteen minutes!"

WADC had its full quota of fun in the course of its development, too. Mr. "Doc" Williams of the WADC staff, tells of three particular happenings which he remembers.

A popular "sport" at radio stations in the early days, and still today, though not carried quite as far, perhaps, was attempting to "break up" the announcer who happened to be on the air. In the days when there were virtually no women in radio, this "sport" could be carried to almost unbelievable extremes. It apparently went the limit when fellow staff members at WADC undressed completely a newscaster while he was on the air. But the announcer did not break!

Mr. Merv Roberts, a foemer WADC announcer, was reading the news one day in the early thirties. A particular story contained the statement that a certain event occurred "four years ago". As Mr. Roberts read the sentence, the engineer, who seems to have had an especially fiendish sense of humor, caught Roberts' eye, and asked through the glass, "How long?" Roberts repeated, "Four years ago." The engineer cupped his hand to his ear and asked, "How long?" Roberts again

repeated, "Four years!", more loudly this time. This question was asked and answered four times, each time more loudly by Roberts, before he realized that each repeat was going out over the air, but that of course the question was not!

As we have noted, children's shows and amateur programs were big attractions and made up a large percentage of air time prior to 1930. Mr. Williams tells of a little girl who appeared on one of the amateur hours. She was all scrubbed and starched for her radio debut. She announced, when asked by the master of ceremonies, that she was five years old and could sing "Jesus Loves Me". The first verse went fine and all was well until about halfway through the second verse, when the young lady stopped abruptly and made the following pronouncement: "I have to go to the toilet."

"WADC, First in Akron", is still growing and is still having fun. The public is invited to stop in and see the station's brand new home at the corner of Main and Mill Streets in downtown Akron, any time.

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