



1981

WHAS Radio and the Development of Broadcasting in Kentucky, 1922-1942

Terry L. Birdwhistell

University of Kentucky, tlbird@uky.edu

[Click here to let us know how access to this document benefits you.](#)

Follow this and additional works at: https://uknowledge.uky.edu/libraries_facpub

 Part of the [Cultural History Commons](#), and the [Social History Commons](#)

Repository Citation

Birdwhistell, Terry L., "WHAS Radio and the Development of Broadcasting in Kentucky, 1922-1942" (1981). *Library Faculty and Staff Publications*. 4.

https://uknowledge.uky.edu/libraries_facpub/4

This Article is brought to you for free and open access by the University of Kentucky Libraries at UKnowledge. It has been accepted for inclusion in Library Faculty and Staff Publications by an authorized administrator of UKnowledge. For more information, please contact UKnowledge@sv.uky.edu.

WHAS Radio and the Development of Broadcasting in Kentucky, 1922-1942

WHAS Radio and the Development of Broadcasting in Kentucky, 1922–1942

by Terry L. Birdwhistell

In the early 1920s, America was introduced to a new medium which would ultimately reach into virtually every home and affect every individual. The broadcast of election results on the evening of November 2, 1920, by radio station KDKA, Pittsburgh, awakened the country to the almost unlimited possibilities of radio.¹ While only KDKA was licensed to broadcast by the federal government in that first year, it was joined by twenty-eight additional stations in 1921. By July 1922, over five hundred stations were licensed to operate in the United States.² Comparing it with the Oklahoma Land Boom or the California Gold Rush, Eric Barnouw has aptly described the radio craze during this era as a "Tower of Babel."³

The rush to radio was so overwhelming that by June 1, 1922, California boasted of fifty stations, while New York reported eighteen. Only seven states of the Union remained without at least one radio station. Kentucky held that dubious distinction along with Delaware, Idaho, Mississippi, New Hampshire, South Carolina, and Wyoming.⁴ Yet only six weeks later Kentucky entered the era of modern communications. At 7:30 P.M. on the warm evening of July 18, 1922, Credo Fitch Harris announced to all who cared or were able to listen: "This is WHAS, the radio telephone broadcasting station of the *Courier-Journal* and the *Louisville Times*, in Louisville, Kentucky!"⁵

The author is oral history coordinator, Department of Special Collections, University of Kentucky Libraries.

¹Gleason L. Archer, *History of Radio to 1925* (New York, 1938), 208.

²Hiram L. Jome, *Economics of the Radio Industry* (Chicago, 1925), 70.

³Erik Barnouw, *A History of Broadcasting in the United States*, Vol. I: *A Tower in Babel* (New York, 1966), 4.

⁴Wesley Herndon Wallace, "The Development of Broadcasting in North Carolina, 1922–1948" (Ph.D. dissertation, Duke University, 1962), 12.

⁵Credo Fitch Harris, *Microphone Memoirs of the Horse and Buggy Days of Radio* (Indianapolis, 1937), 49.

The *Courier-Journal* and the *Louisville Times* were certainly not the first newspapers to become involved in radio. As early as August 1920, the *Detroit News* had experimented with broadcasting, with its station WWJ claiming the distinction of being America's first newspaper-owned station. By July 1922, over forty such newspaper stations were broadcasting across the country.⁶ In fact, newspapers were destined to play a key role in the early development of radio as owners and publicists of fledgling stations. Harvey J. Levin, in a study of newspaper-owned stations, noted that "newspapers' abundant financial resources and ready access to the capital market undoubtedly facilitated the movement." Levine contends, however, that newspapers entered broadcasting because of the prestige of affiliations and fear of the new competitor.⁷

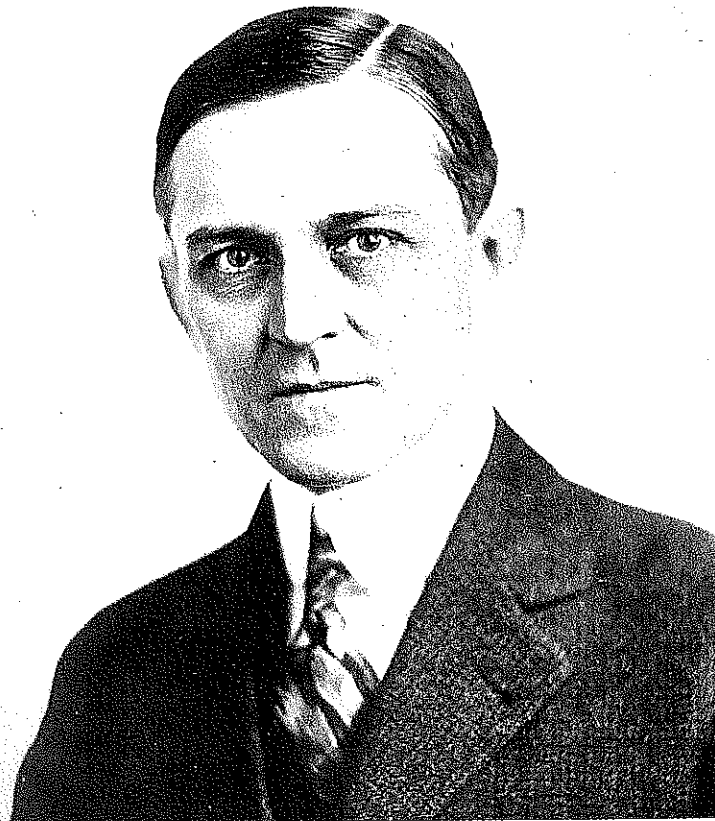
Robert Worth Bingham, a lawyer by education, had purchased the *Courier-Journal* and *Times* in 1918. In spring 1922, his curiosity about radio had been so sufficiently aroused that he confided to his longtime friend Credo Harris a desire to start a station in Louisville. A newspaperman and successful novelist, Harris was relatively unfamiliar with radio at that time. He recalls that, even though Bingham saw radio as a possible means of increasing his paper's circulation, "he was drawn by its fascinating mystery as an agent of public service."⁸ Barry Bingham, Sr., has said that his father Robert's "conception was that this would mean that a lot of people in Kentucky would hear about the arts, about music, about things of that kind, who would never have any access to it otherwise."⁹

⁶Maryland Waller Wilson, "Broadcasting By The Newspaper-Owned Stations in Detroit, 1920-1927" (Ph.D. dissertation, University of Michigan, 1952), ii; Wallace, "Broadcasting in North Carolina," 12.

⁷Harvey J. Levin, *Broadcasting Regulation and Joint Ownership of Media* (New York, 1960), 42-43; Wallace, "Broadcasting in North Carolina," 18; Francis Chase, Jr., *Sound and Fury: An Informal History of Broadcasting* (New York, 1942), 133.

⁸Harris, *Microphone Memoirs*, 16.

⁹Interview with Barry Bingham, Sr., Louisville, Kentucky, February 8, 1980. WHAS Oral History Project (Special Collections, University of Kentucky Library).



Robert Worth Bingham.

Reprinted with permission from *The Courier-Journal*
and *The Louisville Times* Archives.

Harris cautiously agreed to assist his friend Bingham in the new undertaking. With Emmett Graft, whom he hired as WHAS's first radio operator and engineer, Harris traveled to Detroit for firsthand observation of the WWJ operation. During late spring and early summer 1922, a Western Electric transmitter and a makeshift studio were installed in the Fireproof Storage Building adjacent to the *Courier-Journal's* headquarters at

Third and Liberty. The transmitter alone cost approximately \$10,500, and operating costs were difficult to predict.¹⁰ On July 13, 1922, WHAS was licensed by the U. S. Department of Commerce: station no. 539 to operate on a power of 500 watts, the maximum then allowed, and to broadcast at 360 meters. That every station in the country was broadcasting at 360 meters was causing considerable confusion for radio listeners.¹¹

Dorothy Kirchhubel, who became one of the three original WHAS employees, was looking for a secretarial job when a friend suggested she apply to the new radio department at the *Courier-Journal*. Kirchhubel asked, "What's radio?" Her friend responded, "Music in the air." Kirchhubel, who was to work twenty years for the station, imagined birds singing atop a barn.¹²

Louisville's response to WHAS's initial broadcasts was overwhelming. Radio seemed to have an immediate and salubrious impact on local business. The *Courier-Journal* gleefully reported that Louisville radio dealers were sponsoring "open air radio parties" whereby hundreds of people would gather in the streets to be entertained by WHAS programs transmitted through loudspeakers.¹³ The newspaper itself, in a full-page advertisement, offered "a free radio with twelve new 6-month subscriptions to the daily and Sunday *Courier-Journal*."¹⁴ An enterprising eating establishment boasted that "Jefferson Cafeteria Invites Louisvillians to Listen-in on Radio Gossip. Radio Hot From The Air Served With The Market's Best Foods."¹⁵

Reaction to early WHAS broadcasts came from outside Louisville as well. W.W. Wheeldron of Central City wired, "You come in fine, especially 'Nearer My God, To Thee' . . .

¹⁰Reel 1, WHAS Radio Microfilm Historical File (Special Collections, University of Kentucky Library); Harris, *Microphone Memoirs*, 20; Barnouw, *A Tower in Babel*, 105.

¹¹*Louisville Courier-Journal*, July 14, 1922; Harris, *Microphone Memoirs*, 24; Barnouw, *A Tower in Babel*, 91.

¹²Interview with Dorothy Kirchhubel, Louisville, Kentucky, February 18, 1980, WHAS Oral History Project.

¹³*Louisville Courier-Journal*, July 21, 1922.

¹⁴*Ibid.*, July 15.

¹⁵*Ibid.*, July 23.

Keep the good work going."¹⁶ A telegram from the Riffle Drug Company at Jackson reported that Breathitt County "forgot its feuds" as "a large number of mountain folks gathered . . . to listen to voices in the air."¹⁷ In a more serious response, Professor Henry Clay Anderson of Western State Normal School asserted that WHAS "will do more to help advance education in our State than any one thing which has been introduced during the last decade." He advised Bowling Green schools "to take advantage of this opportunity."¹⁸ Still, it was the novelty of radio that continued to attract the most attention. Hoping to introduce more people to the joys of radio, WHAS dispatched a mobile receiving unit to tour the area. In Simpsonville, where there were no radio receiving sets, "one skeptical farmer crawled beneath the truck 'to see if someone wasn't underneath working a phonograph.'"¹⁹

Radio obviously had the potential to infiltrate any area of its listeners' lives. With a headline proclaiming, "Radio Will Keep Him At Home Every Night," one advertisement went on to claim that "Yes, this fascinating new science is doing more to strengthen home ties than anything else today."²⁰ By early August, Dr. Charles W. Welch of Louisville's Fourth Avenue Presbyterian Church was broadcasting church services over WHAS.²¹ At the First Presbyterian Church of Crothersville, Indiana, temporarily without a pastor, a local restaurant provided a radio set so that the congregation could listen to worship services. A sign outside a Louisville church proclaimed, "God Is Always Broadcasting."²²

Although entering the field of broadcasting relatively late, WHAS officials were determined to succeed. Scores of stations had begun gloriously, only to falter in a few months.²³ WHAS, however, with its sound financial backing and a vigorous lobby

¹⁶*Ibid.*, July 17.

¹⁷*Ibid.*, July 19.

¹⁸*Ibid.*, July 21.

¹⁹*Ibid.*, July 27.

²⁰*Ibid.*, August 2.

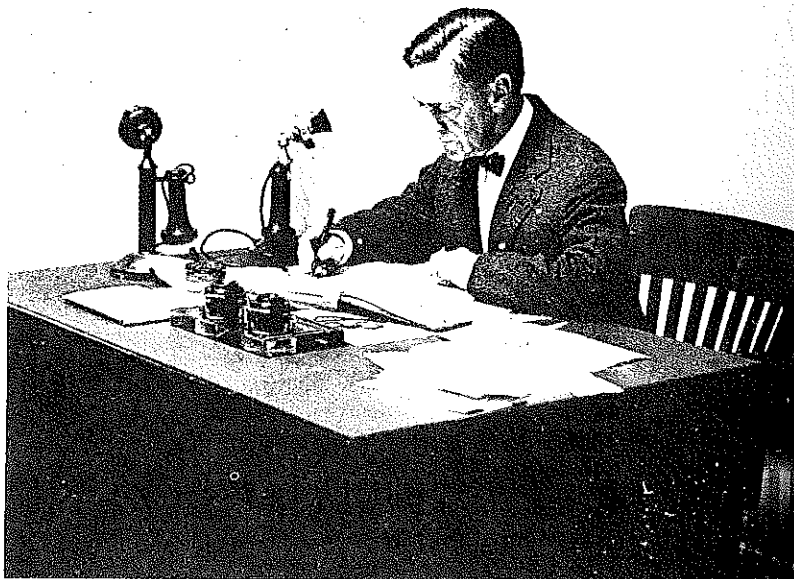
²¹*Ibid.*, August 6.

²²*Ibid.*, August 10.

²³Jome, *Radio Industry*, 71.

for recognition as a top station, proved itself a serious contender. Credo Harris announced the noble intentions of WHAS in an August 1922 letter to Secretary of Commerce Herbert Hoover:

We are now striving to get adequate receiving sets in the rural schools of Kentucky, and when these installations have reached a certain proportion we shall begin a morning daily program for the children; giving them peppy talks by our biggest men and women, the right kind of music and musical lectures, domestic and physical science and with a band, setting-up exercises, etc. In brief, Mr. Secretary, we are turning radio to the best interests of our people, treating it seriously. . . .²⁴



Credo Harris.
Reprinted with permission from *The Courier-Journal* and
The Louisville Times Archives.

²⁴Credo Harris to Herbert Hoover, October 2, 1922, Records of the Federal Communications Commission, General Records Series, 1910-1934 (National Archives, Washington, D. C.).

Initially broadcasting from 4:00 to 5:00 P.M. and from 7:30 to 9:00 P.M., WHAS took advantage of available local talent willing to perform without charge. A remote hook-up was arranged with the Alamo Theater a few blocks away to broadcast music played by the orchestra while silent films were being shown. No recorded music was used on the air. By January 1923, 3,006 performers had broadcast from the cramped WHAS studios. During that same period, the station received over thirty thousand letters, from forty-one states and Canada, regarding its programs. The station boasted that a Department of Commerce expert had named WHAS one of the six top stations in the country.²⁵ In March 1923, Robert Worth Bingham reiterated this assessment to Secretary Hoover:

We feel that you agree with us that no limited commercial stations are playing this new game of radio broadcasting more seriously and conscientiously than WHAS, and reports from afar seem conclusive of the fact that our concerts and features are surpassed by none. We say this in no spirit of boasting. . . .²⁶

The first days at WHAS, however, were not entirely tranquil. As elsewhere around the country, these new "broadcasters" cut sharply into the access of amateur operators to the airwaves. Also, Louisvillians who had become accustomed to listening to KDKA in Pittsburgh and WWJ in Detroit discovered that they could no longer receive those distant stations. As one resident complained, "Ninety-five percent of the receiving sets in Louisville are unable to tune out this station when it is in operation and they are consequently compelled to receive WHAS or nothing."²⁷ This problem was partially solved when WHAS agreed to observe "Silent Night" each Monday evening so that local listeners could receive other stations. In addition, following a local radio conference, a committee was formed to handle local radio disputes.²⁸

By 1924, Harris and his staff had developed WHAS into an almost routine operation. Fascination with the novelty of radio

²⁵Louisville *Courier-Journal*, January 1, 1923.

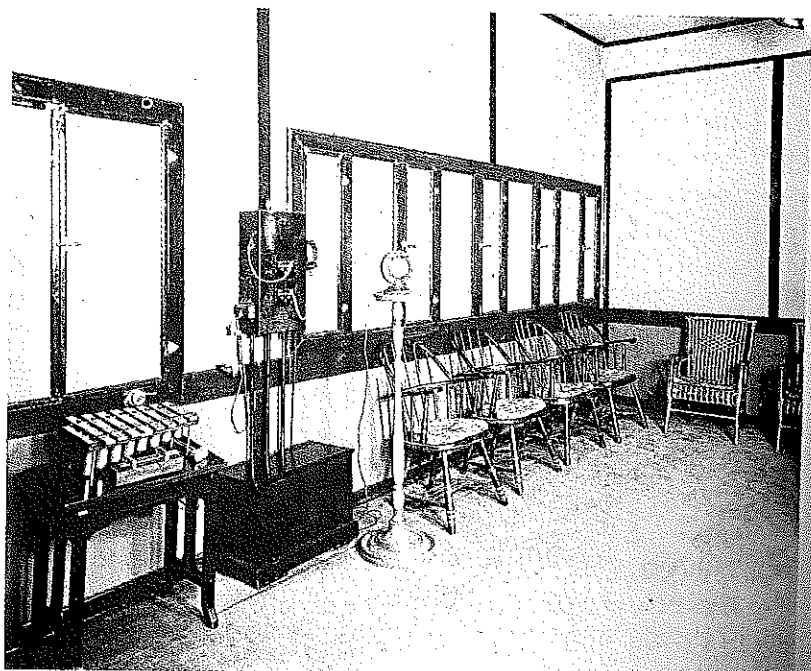
²⁶Robert Worth Bingham to Herbert Hoover, March 26, 1923, FCC Records.

²⁷D. R. Lyman to Department of Commerce, December 5, 1922, *ibid.*

²⁸Louisville *Courier-Journal*, October 14, 1922; E. A. Beane to Department of Commerce, October 16, 1922, *ibid.*

was waning; its audience began to accept WHAS as an integral part of their daily lives. Edward Becker, Jr., of Covington wrote to WHAS in July, "Just want to express my appreciation of your afternoon concerts. They give one an appetite and I believe they far surpass any evening concerts from Los Angeles to New York."²⁹ WHAS coverage expanded rapidly during this period, broadcasting play-by-play accounts of the World Series games, and the speeches of the 1924 presidential campaign, in addition to a variety of local remotes and experiments.

At the end of 1924, WHAS could vaunt a total 900 hours broadcast that year, and the use of 4,500 performers exclusive of remote control artists.³⁰ The station received a substantial number of favorable letters from listeners around the country and in some instances attracted more prestigious attention. Ear-



WHAS studio in 1925, showing "Old Kentucky Home Chimes," remote control panel, and microphone. Reprinted with permission from *The Courier-Journal* and *The Louisville Times* Archives.

²⁹*Louisville Courier-Journal*, July 6, 1924.

³⁰*Ibid.*, January 1, 1925.

ly in 1925, for example, the radio editor of the *Baltimore News* wrote:

I never get tired of listening to WHAS at Louisville sign off. First the verbal time signals, then the nine strokes of the bell, followed by Old Kentucky Home played on the chimes. Then comes a cheery good night. You can always bank on some good music down there. Never anything especially spectacular, but just pleasing and soothing.³¹

Yet just as WHAS seemed to settle comfortably into a familiar routine, the rapidly changing world of radio forced the station to make adjustments.

From its origin, the operation of WHAS was underwritten financially by the newspapers. In founding the station Robert Worth Bingham "never thought of it as a money-making enterprise," a view shared by Station Manager Harris.³² However, as broadcasting costs escalated, considerable attention was focused on auxiliary means to finance these operations. As early as August 1922, WEAJ in New York had experimented with "commercials."³³ The following year, when it learned that the Acme-Evens Flour Mills of Indianapolis was advertising over that city's radio station, Louisville's Ballard and Ballard Company inquired whether WHAS would be "interested in a proposition of this sort from us."³⁴ In a letter to the Radio Division of the Department of Commerce, Harris noted:

Permitting any sort of advertising over our station is the very last thing we wish to do, but if other stations are encouraging it we shall be more and more embarrassed when our Louisville friends continue to ask for this privilege. Is there not some ruling that prohibits this?³⁵

No prohibitive ruling existed and WHAS eventually succumbed to the inevitability of radio advertising.³⁶

Early radio advertisements could not be characterized as hard-sell. One of the earliest forms was that used by the Greater Louisville Savings and Building Association whose general man-

³¹*Ibid.*, January 18.

³²Bingham interview.

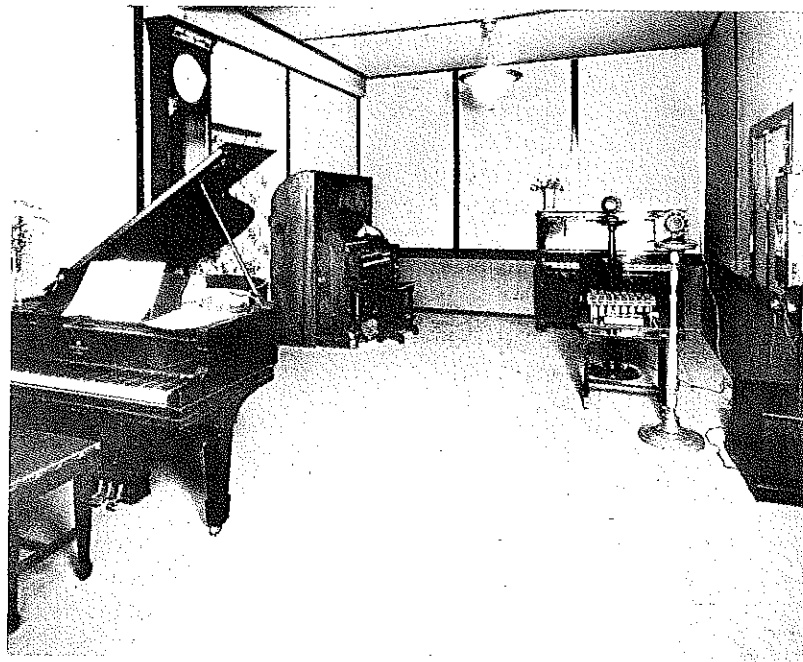
³³William Peck Banning, *Commercial Broadcasting Pioneer: The WEAJ Experiment, 1922-1926* (Cambridge, Mass., 1946), 90.

³⁴M. Lewis to Credo Harris, April 12, 1923, FCC Records.

³⁵Credo Harris to D. B. Carson, April 13, 1923, *ibid.*

³⁶A. J. Tyrer to Credo Harris, April 17, 1923, *ibid.*

ager, Gustav Flexner, desired to place his institution "before the public via radio." Meeting in 1925, Harris and Flexner agreed upon the sponsorship of a "high type" of program under the association's auspices. Thus was conceived the Greater Louisville Ensemble, familiar to listeners for many years.³⁷ For a time at least, advertising maintained its subtlety. One particular product, for instance, was not advertised over WHAS because Harris argued that any mention of a person's feet would be inappropriate.³⁸ Although concessions to fiscal realities had been made, WHAS continued to operate at a deficit until the early 1930s; financial reward would come with further growth.



A WHAS Studio in 1926.
Reprinted with permission from *The Courier-Journal*
and *The Louisville Times* Archives.

³⁷Louisville *Courier-Journal*, November 11, 1928; interview with Carl W. Nielson, Louisville, Kentucky, October 30, 1979, WHAS Oral History Project.

³⁸Interview with Geraldine Fox, Louisville, Kentucky, October 31, 1979, WHAS Oral History Project.

A milestone in the development of the radio industry was the formation of the National Broadcasting Company in November 1926. Within a few months NBC was divided into a "Red" chain fed by WEAJ in New York and a "Blue" chain fed by WJZ, also in New York. In January 1927, Credo Harris of WHAS was instrumental in assembling a "Southern Network," as part of the Red Chain. The southern stations included WHAS, WSM, Nashville, and WSB, Atlanta.³⁹ WHAS quickly assured its listeners that local entertainment would not be abandoned. Of the network programs available, the station expected to send "only the foremost offerings, such as symphonic concerts, artists' recitals and other headline attractions." According to officials, "WHAS' regular nightly concerts are capable of withstanding Nation-wide competition," an optimism which proved unfounded, however, as network programming increasingly filled the station's schedule.⁴⁰

The audience of WHAS was not in consensus concerning the switch to network broadcasting. A resident of Floyd's Knob, Indiana, exhibited particular displeasure when he wrote:

A year or two ago, if you did not like the programme from one station, you could keep on turning till you found something you did like, but no matter where you turn your dials about all you can get is some confounded high powered, chain station broadcasting some "hot mamma" jazzy selection, grand opera or some prima donna whose voice sounds like a couple of cats in a serious argument.⁴¹

But other listeners viewed the sponsored chain broadcasts as a free "present" and congratulated WHAS for "constantly expanding its chain features."⁴² As the chain features increased, however, there were expressions of concern over the mass standardization of American life and culture.⁴³

In 1928, WHAS Radio was granted clear-channel status and permitted to increase power from 500 to 5,000 watts and soon to 10,000 watts. Swagar Sherley, a Washington attorney

³⁹Barnouw, *A Tower in Babel*, 190-91; *Louisville Courier-Journal*, January 1, 1927.

⁴⁰*Louisville Courier-Journal*, January 1, 1927.

⁴¹*Ibid.*, March 5, 1928.

⁴²*Ibid.*, March 12-13.

⁴³See, for example, G. W. Allport and Hadley Cantril, *The Psychology of Radio* (New York, 1935), and Robert S. and Helen Merrill Lynd, *Middletown: A Study in American Culture* (New York, 1929).

and former Kentucky congressman, represented WHAS before the Federal Radio Commission. He declared that the FRC had recognized the "services of WHAS in the past and consistent excellency of the public service of the station."⁴⁴ The fact that Harris served, at Herbert Hoover's request, on the first Federal Radio Commission, together with the political prominence of the Bingham family, raised the question of possible undue influence upon the commission. However, Barry Bingham, Sr., contends: "No, my family never really had any dealing at all with the people who were regulating the industry." Concerning the favorable consideration of the FRC, he argues, "it was mainly quality that attracted attention to the station from the beginning. Also, there may have been an element of geography there."⁴⁵

As the station prepared to sign off on November 10, 1928, the last broadcast at 500 watts, Credo Harris waxed eloquent about WHAS Radio:

Where would this world be were it not for those with the blessed faculty of dreaming dreams, and the splendid courage for making them come true? The *Courier-Journal* and the *Louisville Times* saw the vision and had the grit to capture it. They dreamed of radio as a benefit to our city, state, and neighbors across the river; as a comfort to the afflicted; as an instrument to carry light into untold corners of darkness. And then they had the courage to put their money on that dream — great wads of money. I know, because I helped them spend it.⁴⁶

With that, WHAS began broadcasting with ten times more power from a new transmitter located outside the city, and, at the same time, moved into "luxuriously-appointed and enlarged studios."

Yet another chapter in the history of WHAS began in April 1929, when Dr. Frank L. McVey, president of the University of Kentucky, announced into a radio microphone in Lexington: "The University is on the air —"⁴⁷ For the broadcast of educational programs from studios on the Lexington campus, WHAS agreed to install all necessary equipment and direct telephone lines; the university and the station would share equally

⁴⁴Louisville *Courier-Journal*, October 16, 1928.

⁴⁵Bingham interview.

⁴⁶Louisville *Courier-Journal*, November 11, 1928.

⁴⁷*Ibid.*, April 2, 1929.

the transmission charges.⁴⁸ This agreement began a partnership which attracted national attention. Dr. McVey, somewhat apprehensive about the whole idea of radio but willing to take a chance with it, expressed his hopes for the medium during the maiden broadcast:

Life is faster, filled with greater possibilities and subject to disasters as always. This is the sort of universe we live in. Now comes the radio, bringing to every part of the world the sound of the human voice from every country of the globe. No such possibilities of good and no such opportunity for mere bunk, have been offered to the public as through this amazing invention. The University of Kentucky is not interested in adding to the trivial, so two important forces for constructive effort in our state have agreed to cooperate in giving to the radio audience, what is hoped will be interesting, stimulating and helpful.⁴⁹

From the Louisville studio, owner Bingham reiterated WHAS's noble intentions of reaching the isolated and uneducated—"it is for those whose need is greatest who fill my mind as I think of what this work of ours may mean to them."⁵⁰

The University of Kentucky programs were aired Monday through Friday at noon, initially for fifteen minutes and expanded by 1931 to forty-five. While primarily offering agricultural information, lectures on a variety of topics, as well as musical presentations, were also offered. From the beginning, the school appreciated its responsibility, and under the guidance of Elmer G. "Bromo" Sulzer programming steadily improved.⁵¹ Sulzer, who began his work at the University in public relations, energetically and successfully lobbied for the expansion of its radio commitment. Perhaps his most unique and vital role was in the establishment of "Listening Centers" during the early 1930s.

Both WHAS and the University were committed to reaching families who lived in isolated areas, but those most in need of help, especially in eastern Kentucky, were still not being reached. Sulzer concluded that the problem was caused by a lack of radios in the region. He noted that the 1930 Census re-

⁴⁸Frank L. McVey to Credo Harris, March 15, 1929, Frank L. McVey Papers (Special Collections, University of Kentucky Library).

⁴⁹Louisville *Courier-Journal*, April 2, 1929.

⁵⁰*Ibid.*

⁵¹Edmund deS. Brunner, *Radio And The Farmer And A Symposium On The Relation Of Radio To Rural Life* (New York, 1936), 42-43.

ported only eight radios in Elliott County, while Leslie County had only eleven. While 18.3 percent of all Kentucky families owned radios, the highest percentage of any state in the Southeast, among Kentucky farm families only 6.7 percent owned radios.⁵² The assumption was that if Kentucky mountaineers could be reached by radio, their lives would be enriched. In December 1927, W. S. Kaltenbacker of the *Louisville Courier-Journal* had concluded that "Nothing within so short a time has contributed more to the development of the social side of the Kentucky Highlander than the radio." The innovation had, he stated, "given the mountaineer the modern slant on almost everything going on in the world and he is no longer so unsophisticated as many imagined them."⁵³

Sulzer's concept of "listening centers" appeared to be the most promising format for making radio available in remote areas. In establishing listening centers the University of Kentucky would install radios, provided by WHAS or donated by a local civic club or charitable organization, in a convenient location under the auspices of the center director. The director was often a community center director, minister, high school principal, or country storekeeper, but, according to Sulzer, "invariably a man of intelligence and a leader in his community." The director paid for batteries and maintenance and was required to keep the radio tuned to the University of Kentucky programs and to submit monthly reports. Established June 3, 1933, at Cow Creek in Owsley County was the first of nearly forty centers opened in the 1930s and the 1940s.⁵⁴ Interest was kindled and many families began purchasing their own sets. If both could not be afforded, a radio was often preferred to a telephone, especially if a telephone was available nearby.⁵⁵

Reports from the centers illustrate the significant effect of

⁵²Elmer G. Sulzer, "The Listening-Center Plan in Kentucky," in Josephine H. MacLachy, ed., *Education on the Air* (Columbus, 1934), 149-50; *Fifteenth Census of the United States, 1930: Population*, VI, 10.

⁵³*Louisville Courier-Journal*, December 4, 1927.

⁵⁴Sulzer, "Listening Center Plan," 149-50.

⁵⁵William S. Robinson, "Radio Comes To The Farmer," in Paul F. Lazarsfeld and Frank N. Stanton, eds., *Radio Research 1941* (New York, 1941), 278.

radio on local communities. Vest Listening Center in Knott County noted that "The things that have brought most of my listeners are, of course, speeches by the President, and also by members of the General Assembly of Kentucky." During a month-long period when the set was out of order, one old fellow had remarked to the director, "We are lost to death since the set has stopped receiving."⁵⁶ Alice Lloyd, the listening center director at the Caney Creek Community Center at Pippa Passes, reported that the radio was having a very positive influence on entertainment and recreation, and concluded:

... more important, everyone has conceived a better idea of an outside world where feuds do not exist, where men do not carry pistols with them most of the time, and where homes are comfortable, and women do not have to work like slaves. Thus, an opening has been made for civilization which must soon come to the mountains.⁵⁷

Other listeners, such as those at the Bonanza Center in Floyd County, "resented the idea that we of the mountains have been pictured in such a backward condition."⁵⁸

The first annual Radio Listening Center Directors' Conference, held in 1938 at Gander, Kentucky, was attended by directors, leading educators, radio specialists, and sociologists. Most of the "specialists" at the meeting were convinced and pleased that radio was bringing such a civilizing influence to the Kentucky mountains.⁵⁹ During the conference a local teacher urged respect for and retention of the best parts of mountain culture, "even if some people do regard us a zoo." Tom Wallace, well-known editor of the *Louisville Times*, was struck by the simple beauty of the mountains and the innate intelligence of the people. As he was leaving, Wallace wondered "whether, since the lowlands had sent a mission to Gander, turnabout might not be fair play." Perhaps if Gander would send a mission to the lowlands, "and give us the benefit of their opinions, maybe they would benefit us more than a handful who will climb a mountain in the mud to air their views."⁶⁰

⁵⁶Sulzer, "Listening Center Plan," 151-52.

⁵⁷*Ibid.*, 152-53.

⁵⁸*Ibid.*, 153-54.

⁵⁹*Louisville Courier-Journal*, March 25, 1938.

⁶⁰*Louisville Times*, May 11, 1938.

With the best of intentions, the University of Kentucky, supported by WHAS, had set out to bring radio to the mountains. The uniqueness and apparent success of this project attracted national attention. Although some disagreement surfaced over whether the mountaineers needed its "civilization," radio did bring daily contact with the world outside and thereby changed the lives of hundreds and, eventually, thousands of Kentuckians.

The year 1932 marked a significant change for WHAS. On May 15, the station joined the Columbia Broadcasting System, ending a five-year association with NBC. Headed by William S. Paley since 1928, the CBS network by 1932 had more total stations than NBC-Red. This phenomenal growth has been attributed to a new kind of contract, originated by Paley, in which stations were offered sustaining programs free in exchange for clearance on all sponsored network programs. Thus CBS could sell a national sponsor network time and guarantee the program would be aired on all CBS affiliates. The innovative CBS contract was not the only inducement for the network switch of WHAS; by 1932 the station was entirely surrounded by other superpower stations broadcasting NBC programs. Affiliation with CBS enabled WHAS to offer alternative programming over a five-hundred-mile radius of the central United States, which included 48 percent of the nation's radio receiving sets. Barry Bingham, Sr., who assumed management of the family business in 1933, has said that the CBS move was "a switch I have to say that I've never regretted." Bingham believed that CBS offered "a better quality of programming" and "was more interested in broadcast news than any other network." That WHAS soon began to operate at a profit for the first time made its affiliation with CBS even more gratifying.⁶¹ With its power increased to 25,000 watts in 1932 and to the present 50,000 watts, clear-channel the following year, WHAS joined a very select group of broadcasters in the country.⁶²

⁶¹Louisville *Courier-Journal*, April 14, 1932; Erik Barnouw, *A History of Broadcasting in the United States*, Vol. II: *The Golden Web* (New York, 1968), 58; Barnouw, *A Tower in Babel*, 250-51; Bingham interview; Louisville *Courier-Journal*, May 1, 1932.

⁶²Louisville *Courier-Journal*, October 5, 1932, January 1, 1933.

The radio audience of WHAS in January 1937 likely remember well the eerie message broadcast and rebroadcast over several days: "Send a boat . . ." As the rains continued and the Ohio River rose steadily, WHAS began broadcasting flood warnings at 2:00 P.M. on January 21. Five WHAS field crews, each consisting of an announcer and an engineer, maneuvered through the threatened city to report evacuations and rising waters; the station also dispatched sound trucks. By the twenty-fourth, the entire facilities of WHAS had shifted to coverage of the worsening flood. For more than eight days, and 187 hours of continuous broadcasting, WHAS was a vital link to survival for thousands of flood victims.⁶³

While the flood waters swelled, WHAS initially broadcast with power directly furnished from the Dix Dam generating station in Mercer County and by an auxiliary generator at the Jeffersontown transmitter. When these sources failed, broadcasts continued by telephone through the facilities of WSM in Nashville. Soon other stations surrounding Louisville, and eventually both networks, began to rebroadcast the WHAS warnings. Carl Nielson, a WHAS engineer, recalls: "I took a call from London, England. They wanted permission to put the broadcast of the flood on the British network. I said 'Sure, go ahead.' I didn't ask anybody else. You made decisions. It was like wartime."⁶⁴

Many WHAS employees as well as some newspaper staff worked almost continuously in the studios during the flood, with brief respites at the Seelbach Hotel, where WHAS had taken over a couple of floors. Barry Bingham, Sr., whose wife was having a baby during the crisis, remained at the station and assisted in broadcasting flood warnings.⁶⁵ Joe Fox, a station engineer, recalls an incident involving the youthful-looking Bingham:

He was helping out in anything that he could do. . . . This one guy kinda picked him as his own copy boy. "Take this in. Take this in." After a while there, he was working him pretty hard. Barry was a little slow getting back and he lit in on him. "Hey, you're going to have to beat this!" Chewed him out. Somebody else overheard this conversation and then told the man, "That's Barry Bingham, the man who pays your salary." Pretty well shook him up, he almost fainted.⁶⁶

⁶³*Ibid.*, January 24, February 2, 1937.

⁶⁴*Ibid.*, January 26, 1937; Nielson interview.

⁶⁵Bingham interview.

⁶⁶Interview with Joe C. Fox, Louisville, Kentucky, October 31, 1979, WHAS Oral History Project.

Thousands around the country had shared the flood experience with Louisville via radio. Commenting on the drama, the *Milwaukee Journal* editorialized, "Today as never before we all can get the feel of action at the front. Few will ever forget nights by the radio when they tuned out music and jest that somehow sounded insipid, to hear the crisp sentences of WHAS over WSM." Later in May 1937, upon receipt of the Columbia Award for Distinguished Contribution to the Radio Art, awarded to WHAS for its reporting of the Great Flood, owner Bingham responded, "It was then that we began to realize the power of radio."⁶⁷

Radio had developed into big business. In 1938, WHAS replaced its six-year-old transmitter at a cost of six hundred thousand dollars; the station's staff had increased to 125 full-time employees. Competing stations now existed in Louisville and across the state. WHAS — the early non-commercial, all-live-performance, public service station — was forced to make adjustments.⁶⁸ Increasing its hours on the air each day, WHAS began to play selections from the "station's new transcribed library of presentations by the Nation's leading bands." The station also had an increasing commitment to broadcast network programming. All of these changes had a far-reaching impact.⁶⁹

As early as 1934, WHAS had warned the University of Kentucky that network demands were making it increasingly difficult to hold the noon time open for educational programs. That same year a dispute arose over whether the University was being paid by the Lexington Tobacco Board of Trade to broadcast local tobacco prices over WHAS during the broadcasts.⁷⁰ Tensions increased in 1939 when Harris informed Dr. McVey that network pressure was forcing WHAS to cut back the school's air time. Somewhat incensed by these developments, McVey wrote to Mark Ethridge, vice-president of the *Courier-Journal*:

⁶⁷Louisville *Courier-Journal*, February 6, May 3, 1937.

⁶⁸*Ibid.*, February 1, 1938.

⁶⁹*Ibid.*, September 24, 1938.

⁷⁰Credo Harris to Frank L. McVey, November 9, 1934; Thomas Poe Cooperto Credo Harris, December 6, 1934; R. Miller Holland to Frank L. McVey, December 28, 1934, McVey Papers.

The University has endeavored to keep faith with WHAS for the allotted time to it, improving its facilities, increasing its staff . . . and recently the studios have been reorganized and re-located at a cost of \$13,000. Several times in the past when WHAS has been hard pressed by the Communications Commission, representatives from the station here have gone to Washington to bring to the attention of the Commission the educational work done by WHAS.⁷¹

In response to McVey, Ethridge expressed his support of the agricultural programming, but in regard to the other programming he concluded, ". . . I think I should say frankly to you that our people feel that when the University undertakes such things as language teaching and certain types of music appreciation programs the time is very largely lost."⁷²

In January 1940, WHAS Program Manager Robert L. Kennett was concerned specifically about the University's Thursday evening broadcast, "Capsule of Knowledge." Writing to Sulzer, Kennett noted a then-recent survey of central Kentucky radio listeners, which concluded:

From eight to nine o'clock on Thursday, against all stations in this area, we command 80% of the audience. At nine o'clock, we immediately drop to 8%. This 8% is the low of the entire week. At the time the survey was made, your program, of course, started at nine o'clock. I grant that the opposition at that hour is perhaps at its best with Bing Crosby, however I feel something must be done to remedy this poor showing immediately.⁷³

Not surprisingly, the program was cancelled February 1, 1940. Increasing concern for ratings and stiffer competition from other stations caused educational and public affairs programming to suffer.

WHAS continued to devote considerable attention to Kentucky government and political activities. Political speeches were broadcast from around the state and a remote studio was established in Frankfort to report activities of the General Assembly. With many Kentucky politicians learning to use radio effectively, the nature of political campaigns was dramatically changed. Barry Bingham, Sr., recalls, "Alben Barkley always to me was the best [on radio]. . . . Barkley's greatest handicap was that he never knew how to terminate a speech." This idiosyn-

⁷¹Frank L. McVey to Mark Ethridge, September 21, 1939, *ibid.*

⁷²Mark Ethridge to Frank L. McVey, September 25, 1939, *ibid.*

⁷³Robert L. Kennett to Elmer G. Sulzer, January 23, 1940, *ibid.*

crasy caused considerable consternation for Barkley because once his allotted time had run out, WHAS engineers would cut him off in mid-sentence. A. B. "Happy" Chandler and John Y. Brown, Sr., were also adept radio performers, while Keen Johnson, by contrast, was relatively ineffective.⁷⁴ During this period WHAS required payment in advance for all political speeches, as well as the submission of the text for approval prior to broadcast. Bingham's defense of this policy was his feeling "that some form of censorship had to be used. I thought it was too powerful a medium to put in the hands of politicians without any sort of control over how they would use it."⁷⁵

As WHAS entered the 1940s, with practicality displacing innovation, few aspects differentiated Kentucky's pioneer radio station from hundreds of others around the country. Heavy emphasis on network programs and use of recorded music contributed to a sameness in what American listeners derived from radio. As a station that had set out to provide Kentucky with the "right kind of music and musical lectures," WHAS was devoting increasing time to "hillbilly" music, both in the studio and live from Renfro Valley. WHAS officials rationalized that the Renfro Valley music was "not hillbilly in the accepted sense of the term," but "legitimate, authentic folk music." Nevertheless, this music became one of the station's most popular programs.⁷⁶ When Credo Harris retired in 1942 after twenty years as station manager of WHAS, his successor was Lee Coulson, who had made WHAS a commercial success after becoming sales manager in 1928. This changeover was another striking indication of the evolution of WHAS from an early radio pioneer into the business operation of the 1940s.⁷⁷

The effect of WHAS on the overall development of Kentucky from 1922 to 1942 is difficult to assess. As Kentucky's first station, it brought local and statewide radio into thousands of homes. In a rural state where the population had few means of receiving daily information, it offered news, weather, and inex-

⁷⁴Bingham, Nielson, and Fox interviews.

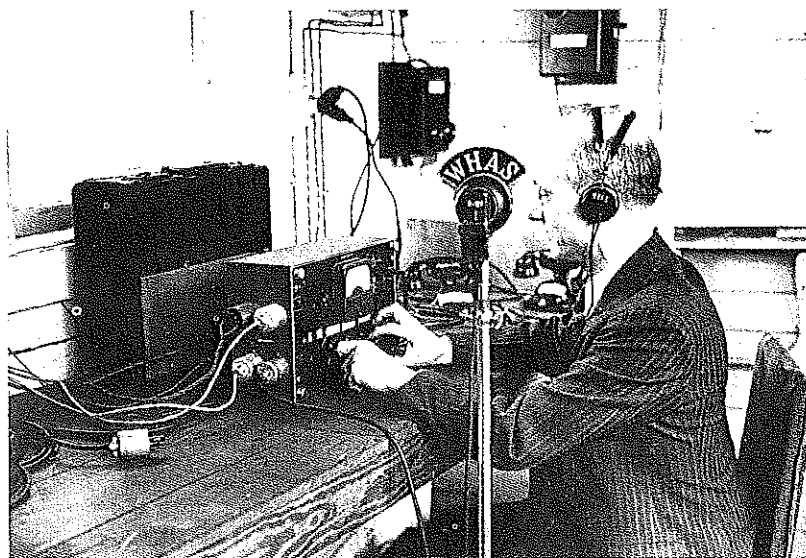
⁷⁵Bingham interview.

⁷⁶Louisville *Courier-Journal*, April 26, 1941.

⁷⁷Bingham, Nielson, and Fox interviews.

pensive entertainment.⁷⁸ Many of the high-minded intentions with which WHAS began in 1922 were subsequently abandoned. Yet acceptance of increased commercialization as a necessity for survival was typical of radio broadcasting in the United States generally, rather than of WHAS in particular.

WHAS was probably least successful in its goal to be a positive influence on Kentucky culture and society. Studies indicated that radio education was primarily ineffective. As years passed, WHAS aired fewer symphonies and considerably more popular music. "Peppy talks by Kentucky's biggest men and women" were replaced by Fred Allen, Jimmy Durante, and other nationally prominent performers. However, the coming of war in Europe dramatically reinforced radio as a medium of "serious" communication. Through WHAS and other stations, Americans would experience a world war more vividly than ever before, and radio would reign supreme for yet another decade.⁷⁹



J. Emmett Graft.

Reprinted with permission from *The Courier-Journal*
and *The Louisville Times Archives*.

⁷⁸Robinson, "Radio Comes to the Farmer," 244.

⁷⁹Charles Henry Stamps, "The Concept of Mass Audience in American Broadcasting; An Historical Descriptive Study" (Ph.D. dissertation, Northwestern University, 1956), 318.