

A SILENT NIGHT
(Well, 99.75% Silent!)
by Gene Martin

One station which achieved undying fame in the early days of DXing was KPSN, Pasadena, California, a 1,000-watt station owned by the Pasadena Star-News. The station operated on 950, although in those days we called that frequency 315.6 meters, for kilocycles had not been introduced to the radio public of the mid-1920's. And kilohertz was an inconceivable thing that was not to come along until about 30 years in the future.

The KPSN leap to fame came about because the station owners were out of touch with what was going on in radio in January, 1926.

DXing was firmly established as a burgeoning hobby at that time; almost every listener was a DXer. In the Midwest, we thrilled to hear KDKA at 309 meters, KFI at 468.5 meters, and WJZ, Havana, at 399.8 meters. KFI, incidentally, still transmits on 468.5 meters, but not many U.S. stations are still located at the same spots on the dial which they occupied in 1926.

One Sunday night in January, 1926, the 400 or so existing stations in the U.S. agreed voluntarily to sign off and leave the airwaves silent so that American listeners could make an effort to hear Europe. I recall it vividly, and the information from Gene Allen of Vallejo, California, places the date at January 24.

Word of this silent night appeared in the newspapers and in Radio Digest, a weekly publication of that day (15 cents) mainly concerned with programs and personalities of this marvelous new toy which brought music, information, and entertainment through the "ether" into the home. At that time, it was six or seven years before the first news broadcasts on radio. The first deejay was about 15 years into the future, although radio networks were to come along within one year.

I do not recall here in 1972 exactly how long that sign-off period lasted, but it was at least one hour, and I believe longer than that. At that time, I was 14 years old, living in Wichita, Kansas, and the family had a fine, new radio, a six-tube battery set, plus a large loud-speaker, about 18 inches tall, and at least ten inches wide across the speaker-opening. The make of the radio was Thermodyne; it was one of the first sets to feature one main dial to tune the broadcast band, but it was equipped with four vernier dials to refine tuning, one vernier for each condenser.

All U.S. stations signed off at the appointed hour that night. The silent period began in the area of 8:00 or 9:00 p.m. EST. I believe that all Canadian stations must have followed suit, as well as the very few Cuban and Mexican stations which existed in 1926.

I began the search for Europe up at the top of the dial, 545 meters (550 kHz), for that frequency becomes the "top" when your frame of reference is meters. The log books of that day showed that Britain operated powerful transmitters at Daventry there in the long wave area. The Thermodyne, however, could not reach the Daventry wavelengths.

Step-by-step, I tuned across the dial to hear nothing but the grumble of static, the popping of interference. The South Main streetcar line, on which I lived, kept right on running during the silent period, now and then blanketing reception with the unparalleled interference which only a trolley creates.

All the way from 550 to 950, the broadcast band yielded only audio silence. Eighty feet of overhead long wire could pick up nothing in the way of audio.

But here at 950 was voice. Great excitement! Through the noise, it became plain that the voice was speaking English. It had to be Europe! It had to be England!

Soon, after adjusting all the verniers, and centering on the signal, it became apparent that the broadcast was a church service. It went on and on, and I began to doubt that Europe was coming in. Still, I didn't want to leave 950 and look into the other frequencies farther on (960 to about 1380), for I feared losing what I had.

Finally, there came on the hour, I suppose, an announcement: "KPSN, Pasadena, California." And if memory serves me correctly, it had been a broadcast from the First Baptist Church of Pasadena.

I recall seeing in Radio Digest later on that listeners across the nation heard KPSN that night and it was explained that KPSN's operators just didn't know they were supposed to be silent at that time.

A full account of this extraordinary event in the history of radio could surely be found by checking the files of the New York Times in late January, 1926. Additional information might be found in the files of the Chicago Daily News, for the News was devoting considerable coverage to radio developments in those days.

In any event, nothing like this night ever happened again in U.S. radio; there never was an occasion after this when all American stations observed a simultaneous silent period for the benefit of DXers. The fact that it happened at all, however, serves to indicate the widespread popularity of DXing in 1926.

Gene Allen's recollections on this event say that he received word from Radio Digest listing an entire week of trans-Atlantic tests, Jan. 24-30, 1926. He recalls that all U.S. stations signed off around 10:00 p.m. CST for this week. During this test period, Allen reported reception of 5SM in Scotland heard one night. At that time, Allen was living in Doniphan, Kansas, the northeast corner of the state, using a 3-tube set operated on batteries from a super DX spot on a high hill in a rural area.

My own recollections on this event are entirely from memory, for I was only a couple of months into DXing at that time, and had not yet begun to keep a logbook. Neither had Allen, for he wrote me, "I have only memories, a few verses, and certificates of those early days."

Ben Vcic of San Jose, California, another old-time DXer, wrote me that his log during January, 1926, doesn't reflect anything unusual. In those early days, of course, DX clubs were non-existent, and there was no information machinery set-up to disseminate DXing information to all who might have been interested.

Gene Allen, who began DXing in 1923, even recalls that when he began listening to radio, all stations in the United States transmitted on the same wave, 360 meters. Nowadays, that wave belongs to WCCO, 24 hours a day, 365 days a year.

By late 1925, when I began listening, the upper and lower limits of the broadcast band were from 1380 to 550.

As to that silent night more than 45 years ago, one thing about it seems noteworthy now, although it didn't seem unusual at the time. Not one Spanish-speaking station was heard during the silent period, although nowadays you would hear them on every frequency during such a test period. Perhaps it's just as well that no Latin American could be heard then, for I would surely have believed it to be a Spaniard.

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