

H8-1-1
KFFC-AM: NOT JUST YOUR AVERAGE RADIO STATION
by Jay Murley

The little note from Bill Hardy reads, "Know anyone who could do a quick feature on KPFC-1240 and the havoc it reaks on KGFJ (1230-ed.) and a few others when it's on the air, how the whole business came about, and why the FCC wants KPFC to continue operating the AM facility?"

Sure: me. At one point, I was in the process of being named FM-AM sales manager when their air staff went out on strike and the fiscal structure came apart. (Quick like a bunny, another L.A. station named me sales manager instead, and that's another story.) Or back in my Arizona days, I figured KPFC-AM as my best catch - even though it was only about 400 miles away. So what's so unique about KPFC-AM?

Plenty. In the world's most competitive radio market, with almost three dozen (of the more than six dozen) AM or FM stations getting mentions in the rating books that determine the flow of tens of millions of advertising dollars, one little AM station persists in having a schedule on only two days a week.

One little AM station that forced the first exception to the rule that FM and AM stations could not duplicate programming more than 50% of the time, if located in major markets. Five years ago, Crosby-Avery Broadcasting claimed that it was the FM programming that was intended to be unduplicated, and the AM-6 FM station was only being duplicated about 8% of the time. When KPFC-AM went "free-form underground" radio, it was the first AM in the nation to do so. (The FM was the second in the country, a month or two after its San Francisco sister station KMFJ(FM) gave the flower children a voice they could truly claim as their own.) With candid discussions of grass and acid, hash and speed, and anything else that might pop into some freak's head (from studios where contact highs were unavoidable), KPFC-AM quickly became something much different from its original intended purpose.

Those studios, thankfully, were separated from the front office by good air conditioning - for staffers and guests who didn't appreciate contact highs. The studios were located in the basement of the Pasadena Presbyterian Church - a wealthy, old-line, conservative congregation's bastion occupying half a block on the Rose Bowl Parade route, Colorado Boulevard. When the Beach Boys referred to little old ladies tooling down that thoroughfare, they were referring to renegades from that staid old church that lent its initials to a set of call letters. A few years later, surfer music would be dismissed as commercial bubblegum by a succession of freaks who had spun Beach Boys singles on California's biggest AM rockers, before emerging into that church basement to bring the long-play album cuts into prominence in Southern California.

Candidly, the engineering was atrocious. After all, KPFC's expressed purpose was to bring church services into the homes of congregation members who happened to be shut-in or just laid up with a head cold. As far as the AM was concerned, well, who worries much about modulation on a hundred-watt share-time station when your total music needs involved half-a-dozen pipe organ solos a week? Or a few numbers from an off-key choir?

Maybe they had a good antenna system, you might be thinking. Good - if you're transmitting from Tarawa. Now I suspect that most DXers share my thanks that the Gilbert & Ellice Islands powerhouse has a horizontal flat-top antenna. But KPFC's flat-top was a little different. It's roughly parallel with all the leaky auto ignitions of Colorado Boulevard. It's anchored to a structure that anchors the printing press of the daily paper published next door. KPFC has a static machine for an AM long-wire, the sort of static machine that does a job on 1240 and local adjacent-channel operations such as the black-programmed KGFJ on 1230. But KPFC was there first - the KGFJ's came later, largely during the FCC's long open season on over-crowded frequencies in the late forties.

KPFC came first, because a wealthy church thought it should have its own radio station. Over the years others have claim-jumped the frequency. But KPFC, historically, has been the station that others must protect. As long as the AM license is renewed; as long as it continues to serve the public interest, free from cross-filing on the application, the old voice of the Pasadena Presbyterian Church - now with a toned-down album-cut sound, will continue to pass muster at the FCC. And the Johnny-come-latelys on nearby frequencies will make the same signal allowances each Wednesday and Sunday as they have since they first signed

on. For KPFC-1240, now relegated to the near-anonymity of unrated audiences in the vast radio market that has set more trends than any other, will continue to turn on its transmitters to protect its franchise. Dozing peacefully on the radio dial, it's a station that did have its day in the sun.

For in spite of its extraordinarily limited schedule and its very limited coverage pattern (barely reaching West Hollywood's Sunset Strip, never reaching the Pacific, and covering less than a third of the market's twelve million people within the half-millivolt contour), this relic out of the past once performed a key function. It offered to the listener without the FM set the chance to sample free-form underground radio during its initial growth period, without having to listen to a friend's FM. FM set sales skyrocketed among 18-24-year-old males, audiences jumped, and the rest is history. Let KPFC rest in peace, five days a week. It's just a harder catch that way - even from as little as forty miles away.

ADDITIONAL INFO ON KRCQ AND KPFC: A trade publication reports that the sale of KPFC-FM (106.7 MHz, 25.5 kw) to KRCQ-1500 was approved, and the station's call was changed to KRCQ-FM Nov. 11th. The stations are supposed to have an unusual set-up for simulcasting: since KRCQ-AM is licensed to Burbank and KRCQ-FM is licensed to Pasadena, music will originate in the Pasadena FM studios and be simulcast on AM (that's a different way of looking at it), but each station will originate its own news and public service features for its community. There is a considerable amount of overlap of the two signals, so IHCA Special Features will let you know how the stations will maintain the 50% separate programming rule, once the smoke clears over this strange setup.

Meantime, the fate of KPFC-1240 is unclear here. The AM was not included in the sale, because of the overlap of the two AM signals, so it presumably is still owned by National Science Network, the most recent owner of both the AM and FM. The 1973 NRC Log lists the hours of KPFC-1240 as 7-11 p.m. Wed. and 7 a.m. Sun. to 2 a.m. Mon., PLT, and that is hardly enough hours to make the AM worth anything by itself. Maybe they'll give it back to the church! --Bill Hardy.

(Editor's note: This article is in reply to a postcard I wrote to Jay Murley in February, 1973, asking if he knew of anyone who could write an article about KPFC-1240, the 100-watt specified-hours station in Pasadena, California. He sent this back, and it got delayed in the avalanche of work I had in the months since then. It seems timely to print it now, since KPFC's FM has just been sold to KRCQ-1500 Burbank.--bh.)