

WHA - "The Oldest Station in the Nation"

by Bob Lazar

The title of this article may be puzzling to many DXers and the general public who may be under the impression that KDKA Pittsburgh is the oldest radio station in the United States. Well, KDKA is most likely the oldest commercial broadcasting station in the nation, but the University of Wisconsin radio station, under the call letters WHA and 9XM has been in existence longer than KDKA and most likely longer than any other U.S. station.

The week of September 18, 1977 WHA celebrated its 60th anniversary. Included in the celebration were tours of their magnificent studio facilities and "The Big Broadcast of 1977" which included recordings of old WHA radio programs, a classical "top 20" all time hit countdown, and a five hour live radio concert.

Sixty years ago was 1917, the year that the University of Wisconsin's experimental station 9XM first broadcast voice and music transmissions. However, 9XM had its beginnings with a radio transmitter that was constructed in a University physics laboratory in 1914. Between 1914 and 1917 this transmitter was used to broadcast weather reports and crop information via morse code. A WHA publication states that this transmitter had a power of 2 kilowatts and had a range of 475 miles but I have my doubts that this so called "primitive" transmitter would be that powerful. The several WHA pamphlets that I have seem to indicate that Professor Earle M. Terry was the most important man in the early development of 9XM but there seems to be a contradiction in the pamphlets as to whether Prof. Terry was the builder of the original transmitter in 1914 or if he is the one responsible for the start of voice transmissions in 1917.

During World War I most stations were ordered off the air but 9XM continued to broadcast in order to provide communications between the Great Lakes Naval Training Station, other Navy installations, and Navy vessels on the Great Lakes. After the war in 1919 a regularly scheduled broadcasting service was begun. The University station was assigned the WHA call letters on January 13, 1922 by the U.S. Department of Commerce. Thus, since WHA and 9XM have been broadcasting continuously since as early as 1914 and since they have been owned and operated by the University of Wisconsin all that time, they claim to be the oldest station in the nation.

It is interesting to note that the oldest recording in the WHA archives is a recording of part of a 1938 DX test. This recording was played on the air as part of WHA's anniversary week nostalgia specials. The DX test was a live remote broadcast from the UW Memorial Union and part of an announcement went like this:

"Good music by Bob Crosby and his Orchestra, entertaining the dancers at the University of Wisconsin 1938 Military Ball, comes to you from Great Hall in the Memorial Union building on the University campus in Madison. This is a DX broadcast from WHA, the Wisconsin State Station, in Madison. And now, before going on with the program, may we call up please, Bob Crosby to our microphone to say a few words....."

In the 1930s WHA broadcast on 940 khz with 2.5 kw and later 5 kw. Since 1941 WHA has broadcast on 970 khz with 5 kw daytime only as they apparently always have. Due to its daytime only hours and its inability to cover the entire state, WHA developed a statewide FM network in the 1940s and 50s. Presently WHA and "the state network" simulcast during part of the day with WHA offering different programming for over half of its broadcast day. Programming consists of news, magazine type programs, classical and jazz music, and various other programs typical of public radio stations.

One of the members of the "FM network" is WLBL Auburndale, a daytime AM station broadcasting on 930 khz with 5 kw.

WLBL is quite an old station itself which has apparently always been owned by the Wisconsin Department of Agriculture. Nowadays WLBL seems to be just another relay of the state network. It should be noted that since WLBL relays the FM program it is not always parallel to WHA. WHA signs on at 0700 ELT daily, with a 434 watt PSA power in winter. WLBL, like all the FM stations in the northern part of the state, signs on at 0800 ELT Monday thru Friday. On Sundays WLBL signs on at 0900 ELT and on Saturdays the sign on isn't until 1000 ELT. The NRC log does not list a PSA power for WLBL so their Mon.-Fri. sign on time might be later during some winter months. Both WHA and WLBL sign off at LSS.

Since 1972 WHA has been located in Vilas Hall on the University campus, an incredible and most unusual building that is difficult to describe so I won't. The WHA radio facilities are some of the best in the country with nine studios and five control rooms. Programming originates from this building for WHA, the state radio network including Madison's WERN-FM, WHA-TV, and the state public TV network. Along with the Madison station, 2 other FM stations in the southern part of the state (WHA and WHHI) are remote controled from the Madison studios. After visiting the WHA studios all I can say is that they are indeed very impressive.

October 15, 1977