

## THE MYSTIQUE OF THE THREE LETTER CALL SIGNS

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The topic of three letter calls in the United States is an unusually emotional one for many members of the DX fraternity. The "passing" of one is cause for prolonged mourning and no little oratory on the need to protect these historic creatures from extinction.

However, some misconceptions exist about these calls. This article is designed to provide a comprehensive overview on the nature of these unique call signs. Included is the call letter history of each of the 75 BCB stations currently using 3 letter signs. A second listing, of the last ten of these calls to disappear, is also featured.

By today's standards the use of call letters by radio, an entertainment and information service, borders on the ludicrous. One can imagine the cries of outrage which would result if a stuffy bureaucrat were to try to force, say, the New York newspapers to deal with the public through their "news-paper signs" of "WNYT" and "WPST". What kind of circulation would magazines entitled "WTME", "KPLA", and "WMS" garner? Still, with 60 years of tradition call letters are fixed upon the American psyche. Besides, they make book-keeping at the FCC easier.

The use of identifying letters is almost as old as radio itself. As all early radio work was done in telegraphic code, spelling out an operator's name or location was unworkable cumbersome. Abbreviations of 2 or 3 letters, usually initials of geographic location, or personal and ship names, were naturally more convenient. Most operators adopted this practice, often independently. Stations "calling" through the ether were thus able to link up with a minimum need to sort out identities.

With America's adoption of the Radio Act of 1912 this practice became formalized under federal authority. Unique identifiers were required in the expanding service, if only to ascertain exactly which distressed "AB" was in danger of visiting Davy Jones' locker. (Surprisingly, one of the most popular calls in the self-assigned era was "FM", this of course 20+ years prior to its invention!).

Under international agreement prefixes were allotted among the various nations. The 1913 edition of "Radio Stations of the United States" records the contemporary practices for allocating land and sea stations, which at that time were composed exclusively of the 3 letter variety: "The call letters assigned to the United States are all combinations (676) beginning with the letter N and all (676) beginning with the letter W, and all combinations (598) from KDA to KZZ, inclusive. (note: Germany had been assigned the KAA-KCZ allocation). The total number of international call letters is thus 1,950, and these are reserved for Government stations and stations open to public and limited commercial service. The combinations KDA to KZZ, with a few exceptions, are reserved for ship stations on the Atlantic and the Gulf of Mexico and for land stations on the Pacific coast. The combinations beginning with W... are reserved, with a few exceptions, for ship stations on the Pacific and the Great Lakes, and for land stations on the Atlantic and Gulf coasts and in the Great Lake region."

Amateur and experimental stations fell into a separate call signal scheme. In fact, the International Bureau at Berne did not have to be notified of their existence. The U. S. was divided into 9 radio districts, and amateurs received calls which began with their district number followed by a pair of letters, such as "8MK". An "X" as the first letter was reserved for experimental stations. Similarly, a "Y" designated the station as being operated by a technical or training school, while a "Z" conferred "special amateur station" status. Run of the mill amateurs made do with the less exotic letters of the alphabet.

The Bureau of Navigation, a division of the Department of Commerce, understandably was required to refine its allocating schemes occasionally over the years. In the early teens virtually all non-amateur land stations were engaged in ship-to-shore communication, and were found clustered along the coasts. As other radio services were developed and the stations crept inland, the policy became to generally assign the K's in "the West" and the W's in "the East". By the late 20's the Mississippi River became fixed as the line of demarcation for broadcasters, although fraternizers can be found on both sides of this divide.

World War I also had a disruptive effect. German submarines did much to popularize radio among American ships as wireless, formerly an expensive option, became a life or death necessity for making the Atlantic run.

Unfortunately, there just weren't enough 3 letter calls to go around. The obvious solution was more letters, and 4 letter KE-- signs became the predominate issue for the rapidly expanding ship service, generally issued on a first come, first served basis in straight alphabetical order. The Department, apparently noting that oceans are interconnected and ships might show up on either coast, no longer made extensive efforts to differentiate between the waters they plied. The less numerous land stations continued to receive 3 letter calls, as turnover insured a modest reserve pool.

Showing partiality to vowels the next major blocks drawn upon were KI--, KO--, and KU--. Having exhausted the vowels, the first available consonant, KD--, was drafted beginning June, 1920. At this point an unexpected anomaly occurred. The Bureau, perhaps caught up in a burst of egalitarianism, began assigning the KD-- signs to virtually all stations, land or sea. The result in October, 1920, was that a new Westinghouse station in East Pittsburg, KDKA, was sandwiched between the ships "Montgomery City" (KDJZ) and Eastern Sword (KDKB). However, by early 1921, when the second Westinghouse broadcast service, WJZ in Newark, NJ (now WABC) was authorized, the original 3 letter call policy had been reinstated. KDKA was left as a monument to aberration.

The flood of broadcasting authorizations which began in earnest December 1921 served to overload the recycling 3 letter blocks. Before the crunch the Bureau was able to assign approximately 180 broadcasters 3 letter signs

It was the more saturated East which was the first to feel the pinch. On April 4, 1922 an application from the Times-Picayune of New Orleans broke new ground by being assigned "WAAB" (now WJBO) as its call. (note: "WAAA" was skipped as no sign was permitted with 3 consecutive like letters.) The progression continued in alphabetical order, with "A" fixed as the third letter, i. e. WAAB, WAAC... WBAA, WBAB... This explains why so many pioneers such as WBAP, WCAU, WEAJ, WHAM, WHAS, WKAQ, WMAQ and WOAI share this middle letter. Starting April, 1923 calls centering on "B" were issued (WBBM, WFBP, WIBG (now WZZD), and WMBD), although by the middle of the decade it became the norm for broadcasters to request distinctive signs.

The West held out until May 8, 1922, when western broadcasters started sharing the 4 letter ship blocks. KDYL in Salt Lake City was both the first authorization and last survivor of this group. When it became KCPX December 21, 1959 all 32 original broadcasters from the KD-- block, except pioneer KDKA, had either expired or switched identities.

The KF-- block, begun June 1922, boasts a few more noteworthy, including KFBK, Doc Brinkley's KFKB, KFNF Shenandoah, IA (now KYFR), KFOD, Anchorage, and KFYP Bismarck. The KG-- group was tapped July 1926: KGCX in Sidney, MT and KGMB Honolulu are two that survive to this day.

All activity in 3 letter calls clearly did not cease following the 1922 switchovers, for a majority, 40, of today's 75 three letter broadcasters received their assignments after 1922. In many cases these calls were inherited when a previously authorized broadcaster expired. There was also trading between the broadcast and non-broadcast station blocks. Some calls were specially requested to tie in with a slogan or licensee name. As far as I can determine, WIS's January, 1930 call assignment marks the last occasion when a broadcaster received a 3 letter sign, excluding reassignments of previously used calls or FM and TV sister stations.

A spot check of 1933 reveals that 91 of the 650-odd broadcasters held 3 letter calls, about 15% of the stations. It was only in the post World War II boom, when AM stations came to be counted in the thousands, that these calls have faded into relative obscurity. However, their absolute numbers have declined only slightly over the years.

It may come as a surprise to most persons, but 3 letter signs still play an active role in regulation. Their use is currently reserved for a service which dates back to the original 1912 assignments, "Coastal Land Stations". However, even this service has threatened to exhaust the small allotment. Previously "Class 2" coastal stations were allowed to draw on the block. But an impending shortage forced the FCC to restrict these calls to only new stations of the "Class 1 (excluding Alaska)" classification, which is where the matter stands today.

Following are the call histories of the 75 AM stations currently using 3 letter calls. Listed is 1) The date of the first formal authorization of the current 3 letter call 2) Current city and frequency 3) Call letter history, original owner, plus original city if different from current. An "\*" denotes that a previous broadcaster (not including ship or non-broadcasting land station) had used the call sign. The information, culled from various FCC, FRC, and Department of Commerce files, was as carefully checked for accuracy as possible. Any errors are hopefully few in number, and I would appreciate a note from anyone discovering a discrepancy.

1921

9/15 WBZ BOSTON, MA (1030) original, Westinghouse, Springfield, MA  
 11/15 KYW PHILADELPHIA, PA (1060) orig auth, Westinghouse, Chicago. Assigned  
 KYW-KFKX 10/1/28-5/12/33. Station moved to Phil 1934. KYW call  
 transferred to x-WTAM Cleveland 2/13/56, returned to Phil 6/19/65.  
 12/7 KWG STOCKTON, CA (1230) original, Portable Wireless Telephone Co.

1922

1/9 KQV PITTSBURGH, PA (1410) original, Doubleday-Hill Electric Company  
 1/13 WHA MADISON, WI (970) original, University of Wisconsin  
 2/4 WGY SCHENECTADY, NY (810) original, General Electric Company  
 2/18 WOC DAVENPORT, IA (1420) orig, Karlowa Radio, Rock Island. Consolida-  
 ted as WOC-WHO 5/9/33, WOC split-off, transfer to x-KICK 11/11/34  
 2/20 WOR NEW YORK, NY (710) original, L. Bamberger + Co., Newark, NJ  
 2/21 WHK CLEVELAND, OH (1420) original, Warren R. Cox  
 2/28 KHQ SPOKANE, WA (590) original, Louis Wasmer, Seattle, WA  
 3/2 WLW CINCINNATI, OH (700) original, Crosley Manufacturing Company  
 3/3 WWJ DETROIT, MI (950) 1st auth as WBL, The Detroit News, 10/13/21  
 3/9 KJR SEATTLE, WA (950) orig, V I Kraft. (traded calls w/KOMO 5/6/44)  
 3/10 KLZ DENVER, CO (560) original, Reynolds Radio Company Incorporated  
 3/11 KRE BERKELEY, CA (1400) orig, Maxwell Elec. Used KPAT 4/29/63-6/10/72  
 3/14 KSD SAINT LOUIS, MO (550) original, The Post Dispatch  
 3/14 WGR BUFFALO, NY (550) original, Federal Telephone + Telegraph Co.  
 3/14 KGU HONOLULU, HI (760) original, Marion A. Mulrony  
 3/15 WSB ATLANTA, GA (750) original, The Atlanta Journal Company  
 3/16 WKY OKLAHOMA CITY, OK (930) original, Oklahoma Radio Shop  
 3/18 WHN NEW YORK, NY (1050) original, Ridgewood Times + Publishing Co.,  
 Ridgewood, NJ. Used WMGM 9/15/48-2/27/62.  
 3/18 KHJ LOS ANGELES, CA (930) original, Los Angeles Times  
 3/18 WBT CHARLOTTE, NC (1110) original, Southern Radio Corporation  
 3/20 KMO TACOMA, WA (1360) original, Love Electric Company  
 3/20 KGY OLYMPIA, WA (1240) orig, Saint Martins College, Lacey, WA  
 3/20 WIP PHILADELPHIA, PA (610) original, Gimbel Brothers Dept Store  
 3/21 KGW PORTLAND, OR (620) original, Oregonian Publishing Company  
 3/23 KMJ FRESNO, CA (580) orig., San Joaquin Light + Power Corp.  
 3/23 WEW SAINT LOUIS, MO (770) original, Saint Louis University  
 3/30 WWL NEW ORLEANS, LA (870) original, Loyola University  
 3/31 KFI LOS ANGELES, CA (640) Earle C. Anthony Incorporated  
 4/5 \*WDZ DECATUR, IL (1050) original, James L Bush, Tuscola, IL  
 4/5 KOB ALBUQUERQUE, NM (770) original, N M College, State College, NM  
 4/28 WOI AMES, IA (640) original, Iowa State College  
 5/10 WHB KANSAS CITY, MO (710) orig, Sweeney School. Call reserved 4/21/22

1923

1/19\*WMC MEMPHIS, TN (790) original, Commercial Appeal  
 7/19 WRC WASHINGTON, DC (980) original, Radio Corporation of America

1924

1/22\*KGO SAN FRANCISCO, CA (810) original, General Electric Co., Oakland  
 4/11 WLS CHICAGO, IL (890) original, Sears Roebuck and Company  
 4/15\*WHO DES MOINES, IA (1040) original, Bankers Life Company. Consoli-  
 dated as WOC-WHO 5/9/33-11/10/34.  
 6/1 WGN CHICAGO, IL (720) 1st auth as WDAP, Midwest Radio Central 5/19/22  
 10/14\*KNX LOS ANGELES, CA (1070) orig, Los Angeles Evening Express  
 12/13\*KOA DENVER, CO (850) original, General Electric Company

1925

1/--\*WIL SAINT LOUIS, MO (1430) 1st auth as WEB, The Benwood Co, 4/5/22  
 3/24\*KSL SALT LAKE CITY, UT (1160) 1st auth as KZN 4/21/22, The Deseret  
 News. Call changed to KPPT 7/7/24  
 8/12 KMA SHENANDOAH, IA (960) orig, May Seed + Nursery Company  
 8/20 WJR DETROIT, MI (760) original auth as WJR-WCX, Jewett Radio + De-  
 troit Free Press, Pontiac, MI. WCX had previously been an inde-  
 pendent entity, was deleted from call 4/22/29.  
 10/5 WSM NASHVILLE, TN (650) orig, National Life + Accident Insur ace  
 10/9 KSO DES MOINES, IA (1460) orig, Berry Seed, Clarinda, IA. (KSO call  
 was transferred 3/17/35 to x-KWCR, x-KSO became KRNT same day.  
 12/-- KFH WICHITA, KS (1330) 1st auth as WEAH, Wichita Board of Trade +  
 Landers Radio Company, 5/26/22

1926

11/24 KVI SEATTLE, WA (570) orig, Puget Sound Rx Broadcasting, Tacoma  
 11/27 KXL PORTLAND, OR (750) original, KXL Broadcasters 12/3/26,  
 12/-- KUJ WALLA WALLA, WA (1420) 1st auth as KGEA, Puget Sound Rx, Seattle  
 12/16 WOW OMAHA, NE (590) 1st auth as WOAW, Woodmen of the World, 11/27/22  
 12/17 KYA SAN FRANCISCO, CA (1260) original, Pacific Broadcasting Corp.  
 Call change to KDBQ 6/29/60 rescinded 7/13/60.  
 12/23 KEX PORTLAND, OR (1190) original, Western Broadcasting Company

1927

2/4 KGA SPOKANE, WA (1510) original, Northwest Radio Service Company  
 10/-- KXA SEATTLE, WA (770) 1st auth as KFQX, Alfred Hubbard, 7/8/24.  
 Later KSND, KTCL, KOMO, + KFGA pre KXA assignment.  
 11/25 KWK SAINT LOUIS, MO (1380) 1st auth as KFVE, Film Corp of Amer 4/3/25

1928

3/27\*KGR SAN DIEGO, CA (1360) 1st auth as KFBC, W K Azbill, 7/14/22  
 5/2 KPQ WENATCHEE, WA (560) 1st auth as KGCL, L Wasmer, Seattle, 9/3/26  
 9/13 KOH RENO, NV (630) original, John Peters  
 11/11 KXO EL CENTRO, CA (1230) 1st auth as KGEN, Irey + Bowles, 1/7/27  
 11/11\*WGL FORT WAYNE, IN (1250) 1st auth as WHRJ, Laurer Auto Company,  
 3/3/25, changed to WCWK 9/3/26  
 11/11 WMT CEDAR RAPIDS, IA (600) 1st auth as WJAM, D M Perham, 8/1/22  
 11/11 WOL WASHINGTON, DC (1450) 1st auth as WRHF, Washington Radio Hospital  
 Fund, 12/10/24. (Traded calls with WWDC 2/20/50)  
 11/20\*WGH NEWPORT NEWS, VA (1310) 1st auth as WPAB, Radio Corp of VA, Nor-  
 folk 12/6/26. Also used calls WRCV, WIVA, + WNEW before WGH.

1929

1/9 KDB SANTA BARBARA, CA (1490) 1st auth as KFCR, Santa Barbara Bcg Co,  
 12/22/26. (Listed as authorized for KAPN 10/12-21/69)  
 2/8 KOY PHOENIX, AZ (550) 1st auth as KFCE, Nielson Radio Supply, 9/6/22  
 2/16 KID IDAHO FALLS, IA (590) 1st auth as KGIO, J W Duckworth, 10/15/28  
 3/16 WHP HARRISBURG, PA (580) 1st auth as WHBG, John S Skane, 2/20/25.  
 Call changed to WMBS 12/-/26. 10/3/22  
 3/22 KIT YAKIMA, WA (1280) 1st auth as KFEC, Meier + Franks, Portland  
 4/11 KLO OGDEN, UT (1430) 1st auth as KFUR, H W Perry + C Redfield, 1/5/25  
 5/9 WJW CLEVELAND, OH (850) 1st auth as WLBV, John F Weimer + D A Snick,  
 Mansfield, OH, 12/27/26

1930

1/23 WIS COLUMBIA, SC (560) 1st auth as WGTB, George T Barnes, 11/14/29

Listed below are capsule histories of the last ten stations to forsake  
 three letter calls. The date on the far left is the day they stopped using  
 the three letter call.

4/14/78 WRR now KAAM-1310 Dallas, TX. original auth 3/13/22 for the City  
 of Dallas. Also had pre-broadcast license.  
 9/ 1/75 KOL now KPMS-1300 Seattle, WA. 1st auth as KDZE, The Rhodes Co,  
 5/23/22, changed to KFOA 7/19/23, to KOL 12/6/28  
 8/30/75 KTW KYAC-1250 took over fax, KTW call not transferred to KUUU (now  
 KZOK-1590) by new owner. Orig auth 4/22/22 1st Presby. Church  
 11/ 1/59 WOV now WADO-1280 New York, NY. 1st auth as WGL, Inter. Bcg Corp  
 1/3/27, became WOV 11/11/28, traded calls w/WNEW 11/12/41  
 6/7/59 KLX now KNEW-910 Oakland, CA. 1st auth as KLX, Tribune Pub Co,  
 5/3/22, call changed to KEWB 6/7/59, to KNEW 8/31/66  
 3/1/53 WJZ now WABC-770 New York, NY. orig auth 5/21, Westinghouse, Newark,  
 New Jersey.  
 4/ 3/49 KQW now KCBS-740 San Francisco, CA. original auth 12/9/21, Charles  
 D Herrold.  
 11/12/47 KPO now KNBR-680 San Francisco, CA. orig auth 4/17/22 for Hale  
 Brothers, call changed to KNBC 11/12/47, to KNBR 11/11/62.  
 9/10/45 KLS now KDIA-1310 Oakland, CA. orig auth 3/10/22 for Warner Bro-  
 thers Radio Supply Company, call changed to KWBR 9/10/45,  
 to KDIA 9/1/59  
 6/ 1/45 WLB now KUOM-770 Minneapolis, MN. orig auth 1/13/22 to University  
 of Minnesota, used WLB-WGMS 4/15/27-5/14/33, changed to KUOM  
 6/1/45