

LOOKING BACK AT RADIO

IN 1930

by Gene Martin

The North American broadcast band of 1930 extended from 540 to 1500 kilocycles, and it contained 642 U.S. stations, 81 Canadians, 27 Mexicans, and 17 Cubans. (Please allow me to use the term "kilocycles," for that was the word used in those days, 25 years or so before "kilo-Hertz" was coined to replace it.)

1930 also preceded such things as regular news broadcasts, 24-hour stations, directional antennas, singing commercials, soap operas, and Arbitrons. 1930 was at least a dozen years before the first disc jockey -- a time when stations did not have program formats; instead, they aimed at providing something for everybody.

This article is accompanied by a reproduction of a log of the broadcast band of 1930. The log is from the December, 1930, issue of Radio Index, better known as Radex. To the DX-ers of the day, Radex was the essential tool to pursuit of the distant station. It was the most reliable DX publication available in North America.

The Radex frequency list contains a world of information. Take time to study the publisher's key which precedes the listing. The key contains the explanation for the various symbols in the columns.

Today's DX-ers can have a field day wondering what it would be like to go over this broadcast band with a good radio. DX-ers of the present day will find similarities as well as major differences between the bands of 1930 and now. There are changes, addition, and deletions on every frequency yet from 550 to 720 much has remained the same. Over all these years, KFI has been on 640, WGN on 720, WMAQ on 670, WGR, WKRC, and KSD on 550. There is San Francisco on 680 and New York on 660, although in these cases the calls have changed.

Today's DX-ers may be astonished to see only two 500 watt stations -- both Canadians -- on 1030. Many DX-ers used to report in Radex that they had heard stations on every frequency except 1030! From Dallas, I was able to log both these Canadians, and for a long time, Vancouver was my most prized catch: 1740 miles!

The Radex list shows how extensive was the practice of sharing time on the same frequency. There were five stations in Calgary on 690, and I believe they all used the same transmitter. But most shared time arrangements required separate transmitters. KEX and KOE divided time on 1180, WBBX and KFAB on 770, WNL and KWKH on 850, and so on. When there was sufficient distance between station sharing time, each was permitted to operate at the same time during the day. I don't recall if WBAL and WTIC, on 1060, had this sort of arrangement but probably not, as 1930 was in the era of flat-top antennas radiating superior skywaves. WNL and KWKH had to share time both day and night. However, WBBX and KFAB only had to share time at night, and daytime listeners in central Iowa often complained about interference between the two.

Two stations sharing time on a frequency was quite a feasible arrangement inasmuch as not many stations of the time figured they had to be on the air all day or past midnight anyway. A typical broadcast schedule might have a station signing on at 7 a.m. for a couple of hours, then returning to the air at 11 a.m. for another two or three hours, then returning to the air once again at 5 p.m. until 10 or 11 at night. It is my impression now, many years after the fact, that it was the Chicago stations which first carried programs into the hours past midnight. The program fare in these hours was always the same--dance bands from some hotel or ballroom.

No self-respecting radio station of 1930 would ever be caught playing records! Everything which reached the air was live, obliging stations to hire musicians, singers, and other entertainment. Needless to say, a lot of that talent was mediocre. Yet the other side of the coin is that radio of that day offered local artists opportunities to be heard; this is not often the case nowadays. In all portions of the country the cream of this local talent eventually gained national recognition and was heard on the networks, making it into Show Biz.

The Federal Radio Commission, which preceded the FCC as radio's governing body, frowned on any station which broadcast popular records of the day, though the practice was never forbidden. The idea was that the people's airwaves should not be used to broadcast records which were easily available to anyone on the retail market. The FRC saw radio as much more than a jukebox! How times have changed!

The FRC attitude on records greatly irritated W. K. Henderson, owner of KWKH, Shreveport, La. (His memory is preserved in the call-letters.) To say that Henderson is a colorful character in U. S. radio history would be a vast understatement. He carried on a perpetual feud with the FRC and in the late 1920's and early 1930's he would personally go on the air and spend many minutes at a time denouncing the FRC. His grievances would make a long list, often having to do with FRC regulations: the KWKH power, having to divide time with WNL, and more. But one of his biggest complaints was over the FRC's discouragement of playing records. KWKH played records and Henderson defended this, telling listeners over and over again that his recorded music was far superior to any local talent he could find on the Shreveport scene.

Networks did exist in 1930. The National Broadcasting Company operated two networks, later to be known as the Red and Blue networks. The Columbia Broadcasting System was also operating in 1930, always referred to as "Columbia." It would not come to be known as "CBS" for many years. The key station of NBC-Red was WJAF, New York; the key for the Blue was WJZ, New York. WJAF is now WNBC and WJZ is now WABC. Columbia's key station was WABC, New York. Some time in the 1940's Columbia persuaded WCBS, a tiny station in Springfield, Ill., to give up its call. (You will find it in the list at 1210, a local channel.) Most likely, that was the most profitable transaction the Illinois station made that year. WABC, New York then became WCBS; WJZ quickly appropriated the call which Columbia had abandoned. It was all very timely, for by that time NBC had sold WJZ and its Blue Network which became the American Broadcasting Company. It was at this same time that NBC itself got into the act, changing WJAF to WRCA. (RCA was and still is the parent company of NBC.) There is a certain lustre in call letters which date back to the early days of radio; they are surrounded by an aura of prestige. The prestige attached to WJZ was so strong that Westinghouse gave it new life and adopted it as the call for its TV station in Baltimore.

The anathema attached to records existed strongly in the networks from the very beginnings in 1926 and 1927. The first recorded program ever heard on the networks was King Edward VIII's abdication speech in December, 1936, as relayed via short wave from the BBC. NEC's high brass of that day spent hours restling with their broadcast standards before deciding reluctantly it had to be carried, recorded or not. The whole world new in advance of this broadcast that it would probably be the King's abdication. Winston Churchill was credited with being the King's ghost-writer on that occasion.

All during the great days of network radio, all programs on NEC and CBS were live -- music, drama, comedy, quiz games, soap operas, news reports and commentaries. However, by the mid '30's many individual stations across the country were playing records for all or a portion of their broadcast schedules. Still there were no program formats. Even a station which played records played every kind of music, from grand opera to modern jazz to spirituals on Sunday morning.

The manner in which broadcasting served the religious needs of the people in the 1930's deserves special attention because it is so drastically different from what reaches the airwaves nowadays. To put it bluntly, there were no "leather-lunged" evangelists on the air, peddling salvation and exhorting the pious for contributions. The stations of the day refused to sell time to any religious organization. Instead, broadcast time was given to churches as a part of the station public service obligations. Throughout the country the hour from 11 a. m. to noon on Sundays was donated to the churches of the community. The various denominations of a city would alternate broadcasting Sunday services in this hour. The networks also followed this policy, usually reserving time on Sunday afternoons for regular national broadcasts by the major denominations. The broadcast ethica of the day did not permit the commercialization of religion.

Popular network programs on the air early in the East were often repeated later that night for stations in the West. Thus Amos 'n' Andy was on the air at 7 p. m., Eastern time, on a Blue network of sixteen stations, the farthest west being WLN, Cincinnati. The program was on the air again at 11 p. m., Eastern time, on a network of twenty-six stations, the farthest east being WMAQ, Chicago. Since these were the days before tape recordings, Amos 'n' Andy actually had to perform their fifteen-minute stint twice each night. As late as 1943, Fred Allen's hour show on CBS was aired twice each Sunday night. Inasmuch as I was a great Fred Allen fan, I often heard his first show from KRDL in Dallas at eight o' clock and later, at 10, I would listen to the repeat show on KCL, Salt Lake City. I discovered that he often improved on his comedy between shows.

I do not recall the year that Mutual Broadcasting became the nation's fourth network, although I recall it coincided with WLN's use of 500,000 watts. Mutual was founded initially as a means of linking WOR, WLW and WGN.

INDEX BY FREQUENCIES AND DIAL NUMBERS

Table listing radio stations with call letters, frequencies, and dial numbers. Includes stations like KFKB, KWJ, KJBS, etc.

Table listing radio stations with call letters, frequencies, and dial numbers. Includes stations like KFBB, KWJ, KFBB, etc.

INDEX BY FREQUENCIES AND DIAL NUMBERS

Table listing radio stations with call letters, frequencies, and dial numbers. Includes stations like WJWA, KWJ, KWJ, etc.

Table listing radio stations with call letters, frequencies, and dial numbers. Includes stations like Main Air Supply Co., Norman Baker, etc.

Vertical advertisement for KSTP-TV, featuring call letters and station information.

Vertical advertisement for KIMN, featuring call letters and station information.

Vertical advertisement for KSTR, featuring call letters and station information.

Vertical advertisement for WTRX 150, featuring call letters and station information.

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Table listing radio stations with call letters, frequencies, and dial numbers. Includes stations like CFBU, CFNB, etc.

Table listing radio stations with call letters, frequencies, and dial numbers. Includes stations like Western Ontario, etc.

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Table listing radio stations with call letters, frequencies, and dial numbers. Includes stations like KFBN, KFOD, etc.

Table listing radio stations with call letters, frequencies, and dial numbers. Includes stations like Carleton College, etc.

